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*OUR
DREAMING
DONE*

By the Same Author

LADY ROSE AND MRS. MEMMARY
THE MOMENT OF TRUTH

OUR DREAMING DONE

by
Ruby Ferguson

“ We shall no more evade
The searching light of the sun,
Our game of passion has been played,
Our dreaming done.”—THOMAS HARDY



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I

I

“TO be a Lusca, that is the next thing to being dead,” thought Joanna, the widow. “*Être Lusca, c’est a mourir un peu.*”

The ends of her lips twisted with the painful suppression of laughter; she bit them in and went on looking like a statue.

Darchingham Church was bare, vast and austere, with damp stains making fantastic patterns on the fourteenth-century walls.

This September Sunday morning was dull and chilly, and not enough light broke through the great east window to make its stained glass glow with heartening colour. Saints, apostles and heroes looked cold; St. George’s scarlet cloak was dimmed to a dirty crimson, while St. Peter’s lively purple had faded to grey.

The pews were of black oak, tall and pen-like. The walls, transepts, and even the main aisles were full of memorials to the dead, many of them dead Luscas. A few yards from where Joanna stood, an altar-like tomb bore the life-size chipped effigy of the first Earl of Lusca in seventeenth-century armour; his wife was honoured with a smaller, adjoining erection. (Widow! thought Joanna. . . . No consequence.) Controlling eyes and thoughts, straight before her she gazed, into a shield of veined marble profusely decorated with plaster angels, lilies, and laurel leaves, and commemorating in seventeen rows of gold lettering the virtues of the sixth countess.

A little to the right of this, flush with the grey stone wall, small, plain, squared off in its oak frame, a brass plate bore the inscription:

To the Honoured Memory of
HUBERT RANDOLPH PEREGRINE, 9TH EARL OF LUSCA,
Squadron Leader, Royal Air Force.
Killed on Active Service in Belgium,
February, 1945.
Aged 35 years.

Her husband, Hubert. Already February, 1945, seemed a very long time ago. In actual fact, seven months. A long seven months.

Reminiscent of bygone Luscas as was the general atmosphere

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of this church of their ancestors, the present occasion was not a funeral but a christening. At the same time there was a slightly lugubrious air about the proceedings, for the new Earl and Countess were presenting for holy baptism their fourth daughter.

So much—too much, apparently—had been expected of this infant, born after its father's very unexpected accession to the title. (He was only an obscure cousin before the war cut off the direct line with Hubert.) Yet it was a Lusca baby, and it had been born at Darchingham Park, and the family had turned out in strength to give it the honours of its first public appearance.

Quite an array of celebrities gathered round the font to satisfy the public gaze, previously only familiar with photographs in *The Tatler*. At one end of the line, Constance, the Dowager Countess, one of the last of that almost extinct British species, the Great Lady, Edwardian-hatted and chiffon-scarved; next to her her daughter, Hubert's sister Barbara, and her husband, Sir Andy Woodmyre; the new Earl and Countess, looking less proud than they had hoped to be; the starched white nurse holding the bundle of lace and satin ribbons; the two godmothers and the godfather, whose faces were "so familiar," but whom nobody in the crowded church could quite name; Joanna, the recently widowed countess, who had hardly had a chance to become one of the family; an aunt or two, unidentified; and, finally, under the wing of their brown-caped nurse, the baby's three older sisters in identical grey coats and berets, the Ladies Lavinia, Georgina and Perdita, aged eight, six and four.

The church was packed to the doors—nave, transept, and even choir stalls. The whole village was there, of course; moreover, visitors had come in from miles round, and actually queued until the church was opened, under the scandalised eyes of the rector's wife, who thought their behaviour more fitted to a theatre.

Now that the ceremony was under way, there was a buzz of whispering, more excited than reverent.

"That's her, the widow, the one he picked up in France. . . . Wasn't she on the stage, or something? . . . I never heard that. . . . Thin, isn't she? . . . Oh, I'd call her elegant. . . . I don't care for that hollow-cheeked type, and her hair's too long. . . . I wonder what she's thinking? I mean, when you consider what she's *missed*. . . ."

Joanna, though she caught no word of this, was well aware of what people were saying in those crowded pews behind. She was the kind of person who was always aware of what people were saying.

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Raising her eyes for a moment, she suddenly seemed to see Hubert standing there in front of his brass tablet, arms folded across his blue tunic, looking so nice, ordinary, unassuming and amused. Did he by any chance know all about it? That he was dead, and that she, Joanna . . .

"I baptise thee, Charlotte Ingrid . . ." said Canon Cumbermore. He delighted in this kind of ceremony; a fine-looking man, the rector, in his cassock, surplice and Oxford hood.

The lacy bundle lay in his arms without a quiver. Charlotte Ingrid. It should have been Simon Hubert Peregrine. . . .

And I have lived and died, thought Joanna; I am buried here. Then suddenly: What am I doing here, anyway? Why don't I get out of this? To one who had ever been adept at running away from distasteful situations the question was unanswerable. Unless, of course, you were quite, quite honest . . . then you told yourself, You like the title, you like the prestige, and there isn't anywhere left for you to run to.

How strange is my life, thought Joanna, looking back over some of the scenes of her twenty-seven years. A little while ago these people didn't exist for me. They went on being important to themselves, but they never thought of knowing me, nor I of knowing them. Now I am one of them—or should be—and for life. For life, for life, for life . . . like a sentence passed by a judge.

"To the honoured memory of Hubert Randolph Peregrine . . ."

When they were married by the R.A.F. padre in Paris after the liberation, she had muttered: "Is your name *Peregrine*?" quivering with laughter. "No worse than Inez—Joanna Inez, I ask you!" said Hubert. Laughing Hubert, whom she had hardly known. That was true. She and Hubert had never had time to know each other. Married in October, sent to England to his family three weeks later, a week's leave together in London in February, then widowed. And that was the story of the brief career of Joanna, Countess of Lusca.

Going back a little to the days of laughter, she saw Hubert as just another of the many boys in France who wore Air Force blue. Sitting on a haystack in a field near Quimper, and both of them helpless with laughter. Where on earth did Hubert learn to laugh like that? Not in the family circle, that was obvious. Not in Darchingham Park, village or church. Not to say that the family never laughed—Barbara was quite gay, for instance—but they laughed at different things.

It was Hubert's laughter with which she had fallen in love,

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the first time they met, when he had baled out and landed nearly at her feet in Brittany and cried out in his schoolboy French, "*Ou sweeje ?*" She had replied: "You're in Brittany, near Quimper," and he had said: "Good. That's where I'm supposed to be"; and then, realising that they had both spoken in English, they had burst out laughing, and romantically speaking it was all over from that moment. He looked his most attractive when he laughed, did Hubert. Presumably she had looked attractive, too, . . . life was unpredictable.

Looking back she became deadly serious, seeing the master plan in it. . . . Fate . . . how it was all meant to be. A tomb had been prepared for Joanna among the Luscays of Darchingham; she had been brought to the sight of it. Here she waited for it, and it for her. This is my punishment, she thought; the punishment of a deserter.

Standing there before the font in Darchingham Church she flogged herself with words and pictures. Behind they whispered in the congregation. . . . "Got style, hasn't she? . . . "I don't admire that type really." . . . "Lovely figure." . . . "Yes, too good; not real gentry. . . . Now, I've known the Family for twenty-five years; I remember. . . ."

When they came out of church the spectators were drawn up four deep all the way to the lych-gate. They looked with indifference at Isabel, the new Countess; with avid curiosity at Joanna, the widow; and with tender admiration at the Dowager and Lady Barbara, coming out of church side by side and recognising all the tenants, and smiling from side to side, the old Countess doing little hand jerks of greeting like throwing grain to chickens, and Barbara—who had never had any side and was still wearing the same type of Donegal tweed coat and skirt she had run about the village in before she was married—beaming at everybody and saying "Hallo" in a most friendly manner.

There were stares for the men, obviously not enjoying themselves, and just a flicker of interest for the godparents. Excitement boiled up again at the sight of the little mob of nurses and children: "Aren't they sweet?" "What a pity it wasn't a boy!"—but cooled off completely with the tail-end of the procession, the two elderly aunts whom nobody could quite place, and the poor relation who made her home with the Dowager Countess, and whom everybody knew as Esther.

The cars and chauffeurs were waiting, and they all got in under the eyes of the crowd and drove away in the direction of Darchingham Park. The show was over.

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The show is over, thought Joanna, as the Daimler went cautiously, avoiding the ruts down the long beech avenue, and the house in all its rather forbidding magnificence loomed up before her. Soon the footmen—only two of them since the war and both middle-aged—were busy opening car doors.

The Dowager Countess walked in as though she had been mistress of this place for a lifetime, as, indeed, she had.

She had come to it as a bride in Edwardian times, spacious and rich beyond the dreams of anybody who had not been an English noblewoman in those days. Constance, Countess of Lusca, had received two reigning Queens of England in this great hall of Darchingham Park; it never occurred to her that one could behave otherwise than as receiving a queen. As she walked in, a maid took her fur cape and another maid her handbag, and followed her reverently to the electric lift, as they had been trained to do. This, with the present shortage of servants, left only one maid to perform the same office for the new Countess, but Isabel was still at the stage of accepting a back seat without comment.

"Hallo, Bacon!" cried Barbara gaily to the old butler. "Here we are back again and no lives lost. Baby was terribly good, I suppose I ought to call her Charlotte now she's christened. Or Ingrid. Don't you think that's a perfectly sweet name?"

"Very pretty, Lady Barbara."

"Why so distant? You always called me Baba when I lived at home. Where are we putting our things? Mother has walked off with all the maids. Where are we putting our things, Esther?"

"In the tapestry room, I *think*."

"Good. I'll take Joanna up. Joanna!"

Joanna, tall, too thin, sombre in her unrelieved mourning, was wearing that remote look which some of the family admired and others disliked intensely. She was remembering the first time she had come to Darchingham Park in the dusk of that October evening not quite a year ago.

The car that brought her from the station set her down before the vast flight of steps which led to the colonnaded portico. Substantial, fluted pillars rose to the height of the third floor windows. It was like the forecourt of a Roman temple. The whole house had a classic beauty, at first view unspoiled by the incongruities of the Victorian additions on the wings.

The great doors of Hubert's home opened, and a short elderly manservant of great dignity bowed to her.

"Welcome to Darchingham, my lady, if I may have the honour of greeting you."

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"Thank you," said Joanna, outwardly poised, inwardly frightened. To have to face this alone! If only Hubert could have got leave and brought her. . . .

The hall had stone walls, a shining marble floor. Its tones were white and black, rather austere. But wrought-iron gates, gilded, and opening smoothly, led to a place of cool, pale carpets, gleaming old furniture, and shaded golden lights. Dim in the background, a great branching staircase filled what was like a stage-setting. Joanna was aware of a high stone fireplace with a fire of logs, and warm air which smelt of apple-wood and flowers. Pots of apricot-coloured azaleas stood on either side the fireplace and there were bowls of late roses on tables against the walls.

Across the soft carpet, with silent tread there came a small elderly lady wearing a carefully modulated smile.

Joanna nearly made the terrible *faux pas* of assuming that this was her mother-in-law. Fortunately, before she could speak the small lady said, "How do you do. I hope you had a comfortable journey. I am Esther Lane, Lady Lusca's companion. Lady Lusca thought you might like me to take you to your room before seeing her."

"Thank you," said Joanna, wondering if this was to be the only remark she would ever be called upon to make at Darchingham Park. She might have known that people of the Dowager Lady Lusca's rank did not come down to the front door to meet a strange daughter-in-law.

"Please follow me," said Esther Lane.

They went up in the lift to the first floor, and walked along a broad panelled corridor.

Esther opened double white doors decorated with plaster garlands.

"This is your room, Lady Lusca, and here is your maid, Proudfoot. Your luggage will be up in a few minutes. I will come back for you in—shall we say, twenty minutes?"

"Thank you," said Joanna feeling more dumb than ever.

A huge, silvery room; a bride's room; a room waiting for Hubert's bride. She thought lovingly of Hubert whom she had left that morning at Le Bourget, looking so wistful as she stepped into the bomber which was to carry her over.

"Give my love to Mother, and have a good time at Darchingham. It's all yours, darling. Damn them for not letting me come with you, but I'll get leave early in the New Year."

This lovely room, the canopied bed with its white satin coverlet,

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the pale silver-threaded curtains drawn, and the fire-light soft and warm . . . was *hers*.

A gaunt, middle-aged maid, very proper in immaculate black and white, stood with folded hands.

"Good evening, my lady. I am Proudfoot. I hope you had a pleasant journey. If I could have your ladyship's keys. . . ."

I'm going to enjoy it, thought Joanna; I'm going to love it.

Nevertheless she needed all her self-possession to quell the pang of fright which assailed her when, a little later, she was ushered into her mother-in-law's presence.

A small woman in a filmy grey dress, with a grey velvet neck bow and a cluster of diamonds under a resolute chin. Many women of that generation were slight and small-boned, but what presence they had.

"Joanna? My dear, I am very glad to welcome you home to Darchingham."

"Thank you," said Joanna, her spirits rising in a rush of gratitude for this gracious and kindly welcome.

"You must be tired after your journey. When did you leave Hubert?"

"He saw me off at Le Bourget this morning. He was terribly disappointed they wouldn't let him come."

"Poor boy. Come and let me look at you. . . ."

She stood in the glow of the parchment shaded lamp, hoping that she looked her best, happy that her navy blue dress, fabulously expensive, was Paris's best answer to the departure of the Nazi invader.

"Hubert told me that your mother is Anny Bisset, the singer. A delightful artist. I heard her in Vienna."

"Mummy is still delightful," said Joanna with a smile.

"You lived in Paris all through the occupation, I understand."

"Yes. But that's all over."

"Thank God. Hubert has told me so much about you."

"He talked about you, too, Lady Lusca. He was always talking about his mother and his home."

"Ah yes, Hubert loves his home." The older woman smiled. "From now on it is *your* home."

"You're very gracious to me, a stranger. I do appreciate it."

"My dear, I admit it was a surprise when Hubert wrote and told us he had found a bride in France. He's thirty-five, you know, and we began to be quite afraid that he would never meet

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a girl he cared for. There were girls here, daughters of my friends . . . and yet I never expected *you* to be anything but an ideal wife for Hubert. I have perfect confidence in his taste and his sense of tradition."

(Tradition! thought Joanna, seeing the dangers that lay awaiting inexperience.)

"I understood," said Lady Lusca, "that you were not bringing a maid, so I took the liberty of engaging you one. If you are not pleased with Proudfoot you have only to say so."

"I'm sure I shall be pleased with her. It was kind of you to help me so much."

The old lady leant forward then, and for the first time kissed the girl's cheek.

"Welcome, welcome to Darchingham, my dear child, and may you and Hubert have many happy years here together when this dreadful war is over. Until he comes back, perhaps you would like me to stay here and keep you company; afterwards I shall move over to the Dower House."

"Please don't leave me here alone," said Joanna.

And in the end she had never lived at Darchingham Park alone; she had never lived there with Hubert either. . . .

She came back to earth on this September day of 1945 as Barbara, her sister-in-law, lightly touched her elbow.

"You go up with Esther; I want to talk to the children. I simply adore them."

The children were already being hustled up the stairs in a chattering group. Barbara ran after them.

"Hallo, darlings. It's only Auntie Baba. You were very good in church."

"Our little thitther got cwithened," said the youngest.

"Yes, Perdita."

"He putted water on her fathe."

"Put!" corrected six-year-old Georgina coldly.

"Perdita meant 'put,' didn't you, darling?"

"He putted water on her fathe," said Perdita firmly.

"I'll come up and play with you after luncheon," promised Barbara.

They looked at her unresponsively, and trailed after their nurse.

Upstairs in the tapestry room, a vast high bedroom of rather faded grandeur, Barbara found her sister-in-law standing by the window and looking out across the misty autumnal park.

She has an elegant, eighteenth century look, thought Barbara; she's almost plain really, with those narrow hollowed cheeks and

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that drooping mouth and those long, grey eyes, but you have to keep looking at her.

"Oh, you're ready," said Barbara. "Where are Mrs. Cumbermore and the others?"

"Isabel took them."

"Then you and I are the strays. You know, this house gets draughtier as the years go by. At least you're cosy at the Dower House, aren't you?"

Barbara spoke cheerfully, sweeping off her felt hat, running a tidying hand over her fair, springy hair, and replacing the hat.

"I'm more than ready to eat," she went on. "Church always makes me hungry. Wasn't baby—I mean Charlotte—good? She's the only child in the family who hasn't howled in the Rector's face. My two were christened here and they behaved like infant hooligans. The park looks very misty to-day, doesn't it? I do believe the sun is coming out. What a cheerless morning."

"It's autumn, of course."

"It's only September. I used to love September when I lived here at home. I still think of this as home; ridiculous of me when I've been married ten years."

"It sounds natural to me."

"September! It brings back so many things we used to do. Horse breaking, and jumps made out there just under the windows so that Daddy could watch us as he lay in bed. Poor Daddy. He adored horses, and then to lie on his back for five years before he died. . . . Hubert and I were mad on riding, of course, and . . . does it hurt you to hear about him?"

"About Hubert? No . . . no, of course not."

(Why of course not? thought Barbara.)

She went on. "There were only the two of us and we did everything together. Shared everything. I think one of the happiest things is remembering your childhood, if like Hubert's and mine it was so worth remembering. Don't think I'm sentimental, heaven forbid!"

"It isn't sentimental, to remember when you were happy."

"Joanna!" Barbara gave her sister-in-law a serious, searching look. "You and I have seen too little of each other; I away at home in Yorkshire and you here with Mother, or in London. I do so want us to be like sisters."

(She's kind and sincere, thought Joanna, touched in spite of herself.)

"Thank you, Barbara," she said. "It's sweet of you. I haven't many friends."

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"Then you've got me," said Barbara simply and rather awkwardly. "I'm very glad."

The gong was heard, hollow and far away.

"There it goes!" said Barbara. "You look beautiful; I wish I paid for dressing, but at home I never wear anything but breeches and jackets. The horses, you know. Sit by me at luncheon; I'll arrange it."

The sisters-in-law went down arm in arm.

II

The family luncheon was formal, and being the first which the new Countess had given in her new home was rather stiff, owing to the nervous anxiety of the hostess to impress the Dowager with her capability for the position of *châtelaine* of Darchingham Park.

For patriotic reasons, food still being scarce in the country, and to set an example to the servants—who did very well in their own quarters—the food was simple and not too lavishly served. Vegetable soup; chicken casserole with French beans; jam pancakes; coffee. Bacon and the two footmen waited. The dining-hall, where the Dowager had often dined a hundred guests, was so huge and empty that it echoed, and owing to lighting economies the far corners were depressingly dark. Cold draughts attacked the shoulders.

(This is the last time we eat in here, thought Isabel, the Countess; this is 1945, not 1905.)

Before Hubert's death had so changed their fortunes she and Simon had lived very happily and comfortably in a charming modernised farmhouse in Wiltshire, five bedrooms, and easily run by two maids and a woman from the village, and Nanny so good about cooking the children's meals herself. Of course they had always known that Simon was second string to an earldom, but one never thought that that sort of thing would actually happen. Especially after Hubert married. Joanna might so easily and so *probably* have had a son. But she didn't. Even after Hubert's death everybody in the family wondered, just after his leave and everything. But again she didn't. For weeks the succession trembled in the balance, and in the end it was Simon and Isabel. Joanna became just the widow of the ninth earl and went on living with the Dowager, her mother-in-law, at the Dower House in Darchingham Park.

Simon and Isabel were both modern, clever, and adaptable.

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They would do well at Darchingham, when they got used to it and it to them. It was disconcerting, of course, to be considered not quite the family by the local people; after all the seventh earl had been Simon's grandfather as well as Hubert's. And they had made an unfortunate start with Charlotte Ingrid, born at the Park after their accession to the title. If she had really been Simon Hubert Peregrine, as she was intended to be, the birth of an heir would have given them quite a *cachet* both in the eyes of the Family and the neighbours.

The Countess rose gracefully and caught her mother-in-law's eye with a look that was both assured and commanding.

"Shall we go to the drawing-room?"

In the great green drawing-room with its Louis Quatorze furniture and cabinets of priceless porcelain, ivories, and jades, champagne and christening cake were served, and consumed without enthusiasm.

"I'm leaving now," said Constance the Dowager. "Esther, get my fur and tell Chapman, the car."

Barbara touched Joanna's arm. "Would you like to come for a walk?"

Joanna glanced, from habit, at her mother-in-law.

"Yes. Go for a walk with Barbara, my dear. Not outside the park, of course. I'll see you at tea-time. I'm going to read that book that Esther bought, about the French Revolution not really being a revolution at all, and I'm sure to go to sleep over it."

"Shall we go to the nursery first and see the children?" suggested Barbara.

"If you like," said Joanna who up to now had hardly noticed the small fry. With no children of one's own, one has little interest in the children of others. And do I, thought Joanna with her passion for self-examination, wish I had a child of my own? Do I honestly wish that Hubert and I had had a child after all? Neither heart nor brain made any response. Rather disappointed she followed Barbara through mazes of passages to the blue-and-white nursery suite overlooking the croquet lawn.

Nanny was having her afternoon rest, and the nursery-maid, aged sixteen, was reading aloud to three rather detached-looking children. Lavinia was gazing out of the window; Georgina was absorbed in the healing powers of her grazed knee; and Perdita was muttering to herself in a corner.

"Hallo, darlings," said Barbara. "I've brought Aunt Joanna to play with you."

"No thank you," said Georgina firmly.

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"She is not our Aunt Joanna," said Lavinia. "She is called Lady Lusca, like Mummy."

"Don't you *want* us to play with you?" asked Barbara.

"No, thank you," said all the children simultaneously.

"Oh, aren't they naughty girls, Lady Barbara!" said the nurse-maid.

"Children *are* quaint," said Barbara. "I understand them. They ought to be out on an afternoon like this, you know."

"Nanny is taking them out when she's had her rest."

"Well . . . good-bye, children."

"Good-bye," said Lavinia politely. The others said nothing.

Joanna and Barbara went down the nursery stairs and out to the croquet lawn.

"Daddy had this laid for us," said Barbara; "and the croquet set . . . it was for my eighth birthday."

"Did you have those nurseries?" Joanna asked.

"Hubert and I, yes. It seems such a short time ago, and yet I'm thirty-two and feeling depressingly middle-aged after coping with the job of running Keckwith through the war; children, servant shortage, food problems, husband away most of the time, evacuees, everything."

"That's all over."

"Yes, the war's all over. I think we should try to forget it. In fact I recently made a vow that it should never come into my conversation, and listen to me already! Joanna?"

"Yes."

"I'm Hubert's sister. There were only the two of us, and we loved each other very much. I knew him and understood him—better than even Mother did. He found Mother a little formidable. What I'm trying to say is that, next to you, I was always nearest to Hubert. Joanna, if you want to talk, you can talk to me."

Joanna was silent.

"Are you angry with me for intruding?"

"Good heavens, no!"

There was an awkward silence. Joanna thought, she's doing it all; I should be fair to her.

She said, "What do you want me to tell you about him?"

"Whatever you feel you can."

"I'll tell you how we met; would you like that?"

"Oh, please!"

They passed from the garden into the park, spacious and green, the great trees yellowing through shades of copper, gold, umber,

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and ashen silver. All the time through the still air the small leaves floated down, like fragile coins minted thin in the fairy kilns of Autumn. Ethereal sunlight warmed without brightening the scene.

"When the British landed in France on D-Day, I was in Brittany," said Joanna. "I had had a kind of nervous breakdown, and my mother had arranged for me to go and stay at a farm near Quimper with some relatives of hers. When the longed-for invasion came, taking us by surprise, we thought it better that I should stay where I was. The weeks went by. One day I was walking in the fields when I saw a plane go over, and a parachutist began to fall. I watched carefully in case he should be German, but when he reached the ground safely and began to pull off his harness and overalls I saw that he was wearing Royal Air Force uniform. I ran to him to see if I could help. He asked me where he was, and I answered, 'At Quimper, in Brittany.' Thank goodness, he said, that was where he was supposed to be. He was glad to find that I was English—surprised, of course. I took him back to the farm and gave him a meal, and then we directed him to his station. He was on special service work. Afterwards . . . we saw a great deal of one another."

"You haven't said yet that he was Hubert."

"Haven't I? Of course he was Hubert."

"And when . . . when did you actually find that you were in love?"

"We decided afterwards that it was the first moment we met."

"That was beautiful. That was like Hubert. Go on."

"We decided to be married in Paris, when Paris was free."

"And you were?"

"Yes. After the liberation. It was an exhilarating feeling, quite apart from being married. Everybody was crying for joy."

"And Paris was a kind of home to you, wasn't it?"

"I lived there for many years."

"Under the German occupation too, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Was it terrible?"

"One got used to it."

"Oh, Joanna. I'm certain that's a triumph of under-statement."

"No. You coped with war conditions here in England, and we coped in Paris. Mummy and I got by."

"Did you nearly starve, or anything like that?"

"No. We always had enough."

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"Your mother was a glorious singer, wasn't she? My mother heard her sing in Vienna before the war. She was a great lady of the concert platform, and without a trace of what Mother calls stage-iness. Your being her daughter appealed to Mother."

"That was a good thing. She had every right not to like me . . . to regard me as an interloper. I shan't forget how gracious she was to me when I came over."

"We all liked you at sight. Mother still loves you to speak French with her. Has she asked you to tell her about Paris? She used to go there each year and stay at the Ritz."

"The Ritz is very different now."

"How long did you and Hubert have together after you were married?"

"Fourteen days. Mummy lent us the flat. Then he went back to his base . . . and that was all."

(That, and all the rest, thought Barbara.)

She said, "He wrote and told us about you. We were a bit apprehensive. When we saw you we knew it was all right."

"You were very good to me," said Joanna.

Barbara was silent. At last she said, "Tell me some little thing about him . . . something he said."

"Something he said?"

"For instance, when you told him you were English, what did he say?"

"He said . . . 'What's your name, anyway?' And I said, 'Joanna, but my friends call me Jon.' He said, 'Very good, Jon. My name is Hubert, but my friends call me Shiny.' I said, 'All right, Shiny.' And we both began to laugh."

"Shiny? That's what they called him at school. We never did at home. And do your friends really call you Jon? May I call you that? It brings you nearer."

"Of course."

Barbara stood still. Her skin was very fair and her hair a good colour, but she looked rather plain and untidy.

"This park is full of Hubert. I can almost see him galloping over there between the oaks on his mare, Janie. He loved Janie. He used to jump the railings—just here—and canter down the drive. He made a hide in this tree to photograph an owl's nest . . . oh look, Joanna—Jon! It's there still!" She put her hand on her sister-in-law's arm. "You mustn't live in the past; there's always a future."

"Is there?"

"You're one of us now. You have the family to live for—

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our tradition. There are so few of us left ; we need you. Hubert gave you to us."

"But there's nothing that I can do."

"You'll always be Joanna, Countess of Lusca. When people look at you they will remember Hubert who loved you."

(Always ! she thought. Always Joanna, Countess of Lusca.)

The moment seemed a little tense. Barbara changed the subject abruptly.

"What do you think of Isabel ?"

"I should say that she's capable, with unplumbed depths."

"Oh, I agree."

Barbara opened a gate, and they passed into the drive.

"She is wisely being *pianissimo* just at the moment, with Mother here, and you. She can never quite hope to live up to Mother, who reigned here for forty years ; and though you never reigned here, Jon, you nearly did and she feels that much consideration towards you. But when you and Mother have gone to London she'll get into her stride and I think she'll make quite a thing of it. Simon is very much in earnest, too, and he has dignity. And the children are darlings ; it is lovely to think of Darchingham being full of children again. We had wonderful times here, Jon, with lots of little friends and relations to stay in the holidays. I love children. Will you come and stay with me at Keckwith soon ?"

"Thank you, I should like to, if——"

"Oh, Mother will be glad for you to come. It's very quiet you know, and a bit untidy. Not like this, or Mother's house ! Just hordes of children and horses and dogs, and we live very simply. We have to, because in these days my staff is more willing than competent—mostly refugees and village girls."

"How many children have you ?"

"Only two of my own, worse luck, and both girls. If I'd had a boy, Simon and Isabel wouldn't have been here now. But I'm glad to say that my husband's two nephews aged twelve and ten live with us—they lost their parents in the evacuation from Rangoon—and we adopted one of our small evacuees whose parents couldn't be discovered when the war was over. Eileen is six and so sweet. My own Susan is nine and Caroline is seven."

"What a lot of children."

"I wish I had a dozen."

(I will try to be like her, thought Joanna ; I will try to talk her language.)

They came to the Dower House.

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"I think I'll leave you here," said Barbara, "and run back and have tea with the children in my old nursery. Will you explain to Mother? And I hope you'll be happy, Jon; we shall try to make you so."

"Thank you, Barbara; you've been so kind. Shall I see you to-morrow?"

"We're leaving early for Yorkshire. I shall call to say good-bye to Mother."

Frankland, silver-haired, one of the Dowager's old servants was already standing at the open door.

"Hallo, Frankland. I'm not coming into tea."

"Very good, Lady Barbara."

Joanna walked in alone.

III

Joanna closed the volume of poems.

"Thank you, my dear," said her mother-in-law. "You read beautifully."

"No one could help reading Lamartine beautifully."

"You have a good speaking voice."

"I must get that from my mother; but I don't sing."

"I shall never forget her recital in Vienna."

"There was a quality in Mummy's voice that people never could forget."

"Where did you say she was now?"

"In America. She always wanted to do a concert tour in America. She married an American impresario who came to Paris after the liberation to arrange concerts for the troops. I don't think she will ever come back to Europe."

"She left you to England, and to us, my dear."

"Thank you. You say such kind things, Lady Luscaj."

"I think you should call me Mother . . . or was that what you called her?"

"I always called her Mummy . . . rather babyish."

"There is only Barbara left to call me Mother now—and you."

Joanna agreed by her silence. She thought, I shall never be able to say it.

The room was beautiful with its white panelling and gracefully moulded ceiling. The Dower House was eighteenth century and had the charm of its good architectural period. Constance, Lady

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Lusca, had chosen most of the present furniture herself; she had re-seated some exquisite but shabby chairs in her own fine needlework. She loved delicate pastel shades for carpets and hangings, and her life-long collection of porcelain and silver was famous among connoisseurs.

"My real life at Darchingham was long ago," said Lady Lusca. "I came as a bride in 1910. It was a world you won't remember, before two wars had shattered the fabric of it. We were all beauties then, my dear Joanna." Her chiselled lips smiled faintly.

"Did you ever see the traditional beauties—Lily Langtry, and the rest?"

"I saw them all."

"And were they really——?"

"Not by present day standards. Too much hair. Thick eyebrows. You would have called them untidy."

"Not stream-lined?"

"Emphatically not stream-lined."

"Their clothes must have been exquisite."

Lady Lusca smiled. "I arrived here, aged twenty-two, in a jacket and skirt of pale blue brocade, edged with mink. My blouse was just a cascade of lace, and I wore a mink hat with pale blue feathers under the brim. . . . Why did you remind me of all this, you naughty child, when you and I are left all alone to grow old gracefully together?"

"I find it hard to feel at all old," said Joanna.

"My dear, your youth lies buried with your husband. It can't be otherwise for a wife, according to our code. Let people see in you a gracious memory of the Hubert they knew. I wish you had had a child; there would have been more to live for."

Joanna's fingers closed on the satin arm of her chair.

"Have I anything to live for?"

"My dear, the wound is still open; you can be forgiven for speaking wildly."

"I didn't mean to speak wildly. I appreciate the value of all you have given to me."

"Given to you? No, Joanna, we have given you nothing. It is yours by right, everything that should have been Hubert's is yours for as long as you live. For five months you were Countess of Lusca and you will bear that title until you die."

(Back to the tombs in the church, thought Joanna.)

"You must tell me more of your traditions," she said aloud.

"I shall be very glad to teach you, my dear child. I believe

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our life together will be lovely. And you must not imagine that you will have no more pleasures. You love art and music?"

"Very deeply."

"You will always have their riches. Books, too, and the care of precious things. You must collect, Joanna. Miniatures, jade . . . it is a great interest. When you are out of mourning there will be riding; I'm sure that Isabel will mount you, for I have no stables here. I should like you to take an interest in my charities, but that is an enthusiasm you must learn. Rest your mind and heart during these weeks and months; one day you will wake up and find that you have grown into our life. You and I should be very near to one another. Perhaps some day you will talk to me about Hubert . . . and I shall talk about him to you."

Joanna looked into the fire.

"It was so short."

"Yes. . . . I have hardly appreciated that fact. To be married, and yet to spend only about three weeks out of five months with your husband. You could hardly have begun to know him—forgive me, I didn't mean that——"

"I know what you mean. Of course we did live on the surface, Hubert and I. I suppose we were romantic rather than practical."

"Ah, yes. Life was not kind to you, Joanna."

"Many thousands of others suffered the same loss."

As soon as she had spoken she read in her mother-in-law's glance that the widowing of a Lusca was not to be compared with ordinary bereavements. She should have known that.

The older woman sat upright, poised on her chair rather than relaxed into it. Slight and spare, she still had a look of extraordinary distinction, in her narrow yet somehow flowing dress of black silk with its ruff of pleated black net at the collar, and the black velvet neck-band with its diamond clasp. Her small face was very handsome, with finely cut features, high forehead, and flat temples. It was fine and yet hardly feminine; it belonged to a period, and the mould had by now deteriorated or else been broken. Her silvery white hair was elaborately piled and curled, a work of art carried out twice every day by Esther or her maid, both equally adept after a life-time of practice.

Joanna looked at her with ungrudging admiration.

"I was a foolish woman," said the old lady. "It never occurred to me that Hubert would not survive the war. He had so many escapes . . . before the last time."

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In the silence they both listened to the ticking of the silver clock and the murmuring of the fire.

"Did you not think that Isabel looked well?" asked Lady Lusca.

"Yes. She looked approachable and yet dignified."

"She has character. A good girl and from a good family. Her mother was an excellent hostess. Simon is conscientious, too. I think they will be a success; naturally it is still a little strange to them, to be snatched from obscurity to Darchingham. I hope they will have an heir."

Joanna found no comment.

"Simon has already had a letter from the County Education Committee asking that the Thursday afternoons should be resumed, now the war is over."

"The Thursday afternoons?"

"For many years before the war the Park was open to the public on Thursday afternoons. The County Council provided a guide, such a peculiar little man called—of all things!—Custard. I only spoke to him once; he knew so much about my husband's ancestors, it was rather over-powering, and he had all the pictures in the gallery off by heart. He used to collect shillings for the Cottage Hospital."

"Talking of the Cottage Hospital——"

"Yes, my dear."

"I have had a letter asking me to open a Fair they are holding," said Joanna. "How should I reply?"

"Of course you can't do that. You are in mourning. These people can't be expected to understand the finer points. Give the letter to Esther; she will reply for you."

"Thank you. And the County Home for Blind Girls—I think it was that—ask me for a subscription."

"Oh yes . . . send them a subscription, by all means. Esther does that for me, I believe."

"How much ought I to send?"

"Ask Esther how much I send, and make yours slightly less."

Joanna hesitated, and said, "Lady Lusca . . . the money I had from my mother when I came to England . . . I have been drawing on that for my clothes and personal expenses. Have I—any other funds, or income?"

"Of course you have. You will realise that the *estate* income now goes to Simon, but for your lifetime there will be an allowance in keeping with your position. If you make your home with me,

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as naturally you will, allowing for taxation you will find that you have an income of about two thousand a year."

"As much as that!"

Lady Lusca y looked up quickly, and down again.

"I would not advise you to think of setting up a separate establishment. A young widow who does that sacrifices a good deal of regard."

"I was not thinking of it."

"I did not realise that you were not using the money. You had better see the solicitors. We shall be in London after Christmas." The older woman smiled indulgently. "And in case you are anticipating being too dull, I think it will be quite all right for you to go to a few theatres, first-nights for charity, and so on. I try to move with the times, and people think differently about mourning nowadays, especially after deaths on active service. Let me see . . . it is already seven months ago. You're fond of the theatre, aren't you?"

"It seems a very long time since I went to a play."

"The last time would be Hubert's last leave in London."

"The last night of his leave. We went to see 'Arsenic and Old Lace.' We wanted something to make us laugh."

"I was told it was an amusing play."

"It seems a very long time ago."

"When we are in London," said Lady Lusca y, "you will, of course, only go out with me until the year is up. After that you can join a few suitable friends and accept your own invitations."

"I have no friends in London."

"I shall find you some. Some of my own oldest friends have daughters near your age. I'm glad to say that even the war and the horrors of modern so-called society have not entirely wiped out my circle."

"Barbara suggested while we were walking this afternoon that I should go and stay with her."

"Oh, go by all means. Barbara lives in a rather haphazard style, but she is a devoted mother. I fancy you will find yourself slightly out of your depth at Keckwith Hall, but it will be a change of *milieu*. You'll come to no harm there."

The door opened softly and Esther glided in, in her own peculiarly wraithlike way.

"Ah, here is Esther with my tray," said Lady Lusca y. "Thank you, Esther . . . can it really be ten o'clock? I think I'll go straight upstairs if you'll carry the tray for me. I shall read Mon-

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taigne in bed. Will you get the book for me, Joanna? It is on the shelf under the bureau, a green book."

Joanna rose obediently and crossed the room to the bureau. She stooped . . . a green book? She drew one out and opened it. It fell apart at the place where the sheet of a letter had been inserted, a forgotten letter. . . .

Paris,
Sunday.

"My darling Mother,

This is to tell you that I was duly married yesterday to Joanna whom you will adore. This is the beginning——"

She swept the pages over as though they burned her fingers.

"My dear, I'm sure that isn't the right book. A larger one——"

She replaced the volume and scanned the shelf with passionate scrutiny. . . . "Oh . . . here it is."

"Thank you. Good night, Joanna. You will probably want to stay up a little longer to write letters."

"Good night, Lady Lusca. . . . thank you."

She waited only a few minutes, until her mother-in-law was upstairs and then went to her own room. She tipped up the mirror and looked searchingly at her reflection, critically examining the brilliance of grey eyes restless above gravely modelled cheekbones, the shadowed hollows of the cheeks, the expressive lips.

You haven't done so well, Joanna. The Great Joanna! Wonderful Jon! For once in your life you can't have it both ways, and how good, how very good for you that is going to be. But awfully, terrifyingly final. "This is the beginning——" No, Shiny, this is the end.

Why did I stay? she asked herself. Why didn't I go seven months ago, after Hubert was killed and I hadn't really begun to belong to them? Why did I allow them to possess me? Quite frankly, because I wanted the title and the privileges of their life. And now I have got what I wanted, why am I complaining? I can't expect to have my freedom, too. Much good my freedom did me when I had it!

She didn't belong, that was clear. She was pretending; they were pretending—or were they? A great deal here that wanted thinking out, in those too-long hours of concentrated thought which were her lot. Pretending? Isabel . . . Barbara . . . Lady Lusca? No. Pretty definitely they were not pretending.

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So! It was meant. She had got to accept it. It was her sentence, and if she broke gaol and ran away something far far worse would happen to her. She was superstitious enough to believe that.

Besides, as she had told herself several times lately, for once in her life she had nowhere to run to. Think of Joanna the Great—Joanna Lewalter of the gay, careless years—with nowhere to run to! It was quite obvious that she couldn't follow Mummy any more; tagging round America, in and out of concert halls behind Mummy and the impresario. No, Mummy and she had broken up at last, and the war being over it was better that way.

Write letters, Lady Luscy had said. Who in the wide world was she supposed to write letters to? It was funny, really. She had even stopped writing letters to Mummy with anything that could be called regularity, because their lives had run so far apart that there was no longer any common ground. She had nothing to tell Mummy, and Mummy had nothing to tell her. That last letter, from Pasadena, was just a list of engagements, song titles, and bouquets. Even the song titles no longer had the power to hurt her. For more than two years now she had not opened her mouth to sing. She had just told Lady Luscy, "I don't sing." In a way that was a lie, but in a way it was true. She knew that she would never sing again, for she had always sung for fun and now there would never be any more fun so long as she lived. Barbara again! "You'll always be Joanna, Countess of Luscy." She ought to write that out, and illuminate it, and hang it up where she could see it.

In a way—she told herself, standing back from the mirror—in a way, you are a cheap hypocrite, Jon. You are a Countess, you have two thousand a year and all found, and jewels in the family safe. And you still think you have the right to self-pity. Watch your brain for mental cracks, Jon. You never used to slip up on your values. What's the alternative? This will shake you . . . a job, typing or teaching music, and a back room in a Bloomsbury boarding-house. Because though they probably couldn't take that two thousand from you, or the title either, you have such a queer sense of pride that if you threw away the life you wouldn't accept the trimmings either. You'd walk out Joanna Lewalter again, with half-a-crown in your pocket.

Stop that walking-out talk! You're not walking out. You live here.

The room felt close; a beautiful room in white and pale green

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with a canopied French bed and comfortable, clean-lined old rosewood furniture.

Joanna drew back the velvet curtains and looked out into a perfect night. Moonlight flooded the still park. The embowered trees, their leaves unshed, stood waiting in the misty, unearthly radiance.

Now is the time to walk in the park, thought Joanna. To walk and walk ; to find a small inn with a lighted window and ask for a room ; to sleep under the thatch, and get up at dawn, and drink strong, hot tea over the crackling sticks of a newly-lighted fire ; to stroll into the village as it comes to life in the wine-like September sunlight ; to buy cigarettes in the grocer's shop and ask how the buses run.

These things I shall not do again. . . .

There was a tap at the door.

"Come in," she said, surprised.

It was Lady Luscy's maid.

"Her ladyship wondered whether your ladyship has any eau-de-cologne."

"Certainly. Take the flask . . . here it is."

"Thank you, me lady. Goodnight, me lady."

"Goodnight, Parkinson."

Her ladyship went to bed, window open to the moonlight.

IV

How right the old lady had been when she said one could hardly have begun to know him. Of course she hadn't known the real Hubert, just as he hadn't known the real Joanna. They had married on an infatuation, like thousands of people in the middle of a war.

Joanna had never forgotten that surprising moment in Paris when she realised for the first time that Hubert was conventional at heart.

They had been sitting outside a café in the Rue Royale, sipping thin coffee, when a stream of students, midinettes, American soldiers, and R.A.F. boys had come along, singing, arms linked, waving tricolor flags. The boy on the outside, an American sergeant with beautiful white teeth flashing in his brown face had held out his hand to Joanna ; she had grasped it, sprung to her feet, and held her free hand to Hubert. He did not take it, and

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the next moment she had dropped the sergeant's hand and the gay crowd were half the street away.

Hubert flushed as he turned to her with a laugh.

"Sorry. . . . I'm not very keen on that sort of thing. A bit . . ."

She realised suddenly that Hubert in Paris was a different person from Hubert in the wilds of Brittany. She would have to remember not to be spontaneous any more; rather difficult for one who for twenty-six years had been as impulsive as Joanna Lewalter.

She had gone on silently sipping her coffee, and an absurd caption from an imaginary society paper had flashed into her head, "The Earl and Countess of Lusday taking their morning coffee at Gagnio's." Rather hard luck on that young American, coming up against a real English countess in his first attempt at general fraternisation.

Not that for a moment she wished Hubert anything less than what he was. She was half-French; she was *fine*, in the French way, and though she would have been furious with anyone who suggested she had married him for his title, it had been the title that tipped the balance, down there at Quimper.

When they had only known each other five days, Hubert, crazily in love, had murmured, "We'll get married as soon as we can get to civilisation, won't we, darling?"

Hubert at least knew his own mind.

She had laughed and kissed him, but she hadn't said yes.

She was consistently honest in her reserve. The English half of her was very much in love with the laughing and attractive Hubert, but the French half was not going to rush headlong into a blind alley. A love affair was one thing, and being married alive was another. Joanna Lewalter was neither dewy-eyed nor dewy-minded. She had never in her life exchanged one state or condition for another without gaining on the transaction. One would be a fool to do otherwise.

When Hubert began to talk of marriage, she usually tried to change the subject. His sensibility was not acute; he did not notice it; but she thought, "If this affair dies out, at least I can remind him that I never consented to marry him." Not that she wanted it to die; she was enjoying that summer too much.

The growing victories of the British and Americans made life exciting and the future promising; the war would soon be over now, the hated Huns out of dear France. She saw Hubert every day; he would come dashing up the lane on a rickety bicycle,

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lean it up against the ash tree, and tap on her window in the imperious manner of one who has never been disappointed.

They would walk down the lane, through the wood, to the rushing stream. They would clamber over the rocks to one great boulder in the middle of the water, and sit there with their arms round each other, talking nonsense or discussing the war, or silently dabbling their free hands in the brown flowing stream.

When the midges began to bite too hard in the increasing heat of summer, they would stroll across the fields to a little *auberge* where there were tables under the trees in the orchard. There was a sweet-smelling and convenient haystack in the field behind the inn for moments more intimate still.

One day when they were lazing in the hay, Hubert lifted his head from her shoulder and said, "I know all about you now, but you don't know anything about me."

She carefully replaced the long fair lock of hair which had fallen over his forehead, and said, "So you know all about me now? Well . . . if you're satisfied, I am. And if you're concealing any grim secrets about yourself you'd better turn them up, because it may influence my future policy considerably."

"Let me recapitulate. (That's a good word for the mess; I'll use it later, if I remember.) Your name is Joanna Lewalter. You are not strictly beautiful, but boy! do you make a man look again? Your father was eccentric, English, and a doctor of science. Your mother was—is—Anny Bisset the famous soprano, of whose voice I possess at home a record, singing 'Les Filles de Cadiz.' You and she have lived in Paris for several years, including all the time of the German occupation—and how! You had a nervous breakdown—who wouldn't?—and came to Brittany to recuperate; a heavenly Fate flung me at your feet, literally. *C'est assez.*"

"You mean, *assez bien.*"

"I am in no mood to be idiomatic." With his free hand he lightly spanned her wrist. "Now tell me what you know about me."

"Hubert darling, it is like pinning down the butterfly."

"Pin away."

"Well . . . you are very charming, you wear the D.F.C. ribbon on your tunic, you must have *something* or they wouldn't have promoted you to the rank of Squadron Leader . . . or was that influence?"

"Influence be damned."

"All right, all right! But it is so long since I lived in England,

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I thought rich fathers bought nice ranks for their sons in the army and so on."

"Not in this war. Besides, what makes you think I have a rich father? My father is dead; he died three years ago."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Hubert. You didn't tell me that before."

"I'm telling you now . . . you see, it made a difference to me. It makes a difference to *you* and me."

"How?" she asked idly, without very much interest.

"Darling, I've got a confession to make. I don't know how you'll take it."

(She thought with swift recoil, the old story . . . he has a wife whom he wants to divorce so that he can marry me. Oh, no, thank you, Hubert! I'm glad I didn't give myself away. . . .)

The next moment she was utterly contrite.

"I'm not just a fellow," said Hubert; "I—I sometimes wish I were. I'm an earl. . . . I'm the Earl of Lusca."y."

It was the wildest surprise. For a moment she lay back in the hay, struck dumb by the shock and the refutation of her unfounded suspicions of him; then his puzzled and rather imploring face was too much for her. She began to laugh. She laughed and laughed and couldn't stop. Hubert laughed, too; soon they were helplessly clinging to one another, aching with laughter.

He gasped, "You didn't know, darling? You didn't suspect anything like that, did you?"

"Good heavens, no. It was an utter surprise. I can't realise it now, Hubert. But, darling, I don't care. I don't like you any less. It isn't your fault."

"Bless you." He suddenly began to kiss her desperately, and she sensed a kind of relief and relaxation in him. Then he laid his head back on her shoulder, and said, "This is the most perfect moment of my life. Can you guess why?"

"Why, Hubert? . . . Why, Shiny, dear?"

"Well . . . I'm thirty-five, and you're my first real love, the only girl I've ever wanted to marry. Note that! You see, ever since I was about twenty-four and began to think about marriage, I've thought how wizard it would be to meet a girl who would love me and consent to marry me *before* she knew who I was. I didn't see how it could happen; it probably couldn't have happened in England. The society marriage market is such a calculated racket. Aren't I a romantic damfool?"

"I can understand you perfectly, darling."

"Jon, I don't deserve to be so happy. To have loved you and won you—*before* I told you."

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She was glad he could not see the flush that rose to her cheeks at the memory of her evasions and reservations.

She said gently, "A thing like that would worry anybody who was sensitive."

"Jon, let's fix it . . . to be married in Paris as soon as Paris is free and we can get there."

"Yes, darling."

He gave a huge sigh of relief.

"Jon, when it's all over and we get back home, you'll be my Countess. Lord! How you'll knock them flat. You'll reign at Darchingham, and what fun we'll have. Do you ride?"

"Not very well."

"In any case you'll have to ride rather dignified, but you'll look divine mounted. I'll do the prancing."

"And what leads you to suppose that I shall be welcome in your exalted family?"

"I haven't a doubt about it. You're the type my family admires."

"Well, it's early days to worry about a thing like that."

"How right you are. Do you hope we'll have a lot of children, Jon?"

"Well, I can't say I'm one of those yearning, maternal girls, but I sincerely hope we'll have a family, with looks and brains and everything else it takes."

"An heir within the twelve month—that's always done. A second string in case the heir breaks his neck. And two beautiful, gay daughters."

"And by then I'll be about forty . . . how did we start this morbid conversation?" . . .

Three months later they walked into the flat in the Place du Parc, with Mummy and a crowd of friends straight from their wedding, and there was kissing and champagne. (Joanna knew where the champagne came from, but she didn't tell Hubert. She still had her reservations.) Mummy self-sacrificingly moved on to the discomforts of a hotel, and the Earl and Countess of Lusca y spent their fortnight's honeymoon at the flat.

Yes, it was fun. Paris was electrified, radiant, intoxicated. They saw de Gaulle; they saw Churchill and Montgomery and Eisenhower. They spent terrific sums of money on inadequate meals and luxuries at prohibitive prices. Hubert chose and bought for her an evening gown from Schiaparelli's denuded salon, for which he paid two hundred pounds. They had dinner every night at the Ritz or Maxim's, and it was a thrill not to see any

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of the German officers who had been lording it there for four years.

They danced every night until three or four, and slept in the mornings until noon. It was glorious fun; it was romance. And they ignored the little unexpected irritating traits which each occasionally sensed in the other; the clashes of temperament which gradually steal the glamour from a marriage of infatuation.

One day Joanna said, "Look, I have had the sweetest letter from your mother."

He read it gravely, and said, "Mother is one of the very best. You'll love her."

"I wish you were going to England with me, so that I didn't have to meet your family for the first time alone."

"So do I wish it, darling, but it's no go. It was bad enough wangling you out without aiming at leave for myself."

"Are you by nature a good wangler, Hubert?"

"With qualifications. Are you?"

She laughed. "How do you suppose Mummy and I got by in Paris for four years under the Germans?"

He looked serious. "I should imagine that there was wangling . . . and wangling. There were some who traded with the enemy."

She knew then that as long as she and Hubert lived together he must never know how she and Mummy had made the best of both worlds. Hubert wouldn't understand; his code of honour was almost fanatically rigid.

No, she hadn't ever really known Hubert; and he hadn't known her.

There had been another leave—in London this time, with the rocket bombs falling.

It was February and he should have been home for Christmas but his leave kept getting deferred. . . . "That's the worst of being such a valuable man," he would say.

When he finally arrived they were both so worked up to a pitch of eager gaiety that their love affair seemed to begin all over again.

They were staying at his mother's own house in Henriques Place. He wanted to know what kind of a Christmas she had had . . . how she got on with his people. Everything was wonderful, she told him.

Lady Lusca suggested they should go back to Darchingham for that leave, and he wanted to go . . . but Joanna wouldn't. She was pining for fun, she said, and what were a few rocket-

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bombs? It was worth it. They had, in fact, a rather bad quarrel over this because she told him he was sentimental and he told her he was beginning to think she was hard-boiled. This came so near the truth that she could not cease to resent it. However, they stayed in London, and went to the theatre every night, and then on to a supper place to dance. She had had a silly little triumph, thrilled because people pointed her out and because there was a picture of her in the *Tatler*. Human of her, of course . . . but a bit cheap.

The few days came too quickly to their end.

Hubert said, "My next leave, it will be springtime. We'll go to Darchingham then, won't we? It'll be heavenly."

She agreed to that. So full of herself, she was . . . so full of herself.

She went with him in the taxi to Paddington Station, for he was flying to Belgium from a West country air-field.

Life had always gone so well for her, and she had always got what she wanted, so that it simply did not occur to her that Hubert might never come back. But that was what happened.

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The chrysanthemums arrived in van-loads, with heads like coiffured floor mops or shaggy as the scalps at an Indian's war belt. First they invaded the hall of the Dower House; then they conquered and took possession of it.

"Oh dear, oh dear! What shall we do with all these chrysanthemums?" Esther kept saying in her habitual well-bred whine.

Lady Luscaj smiled indulgently, and said to Joanna, "You will learn by experience never to admire anything aloud."

Lady Luscaj as Patron of the local Chrysanthemum Show had been invited to inspect the exhibits before the official opening, and as this was not a public occasion she had taken her daughter-in-law with her. The importance of their arrival had pleased Joanna; the bowing officials, the clearing of the way as though for royalty. It was a new sensation, to feel that the whole show had been put on for one's own special benefit.

The exhibitors—mostly local nurserymen—respectfully drew the attention of the great ladies to their finest displays. The Dowager glided round the marquee, lorgnette lifted, with an occasional nod and few comments. Joanna, following, felt that

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she was behaving beautifully as she flung her admiration right and left; her "Marvellous!", her "What a divine colour!", her "I love the single ones!", her "Please tell me the name of those; I like them best of all."

Agreeable, bowing attendants had scribbled in note-books, simpering with gratification. After the Show closed at eight o'clock, nurserymen's vans began to roll up to the Dower House, and aproned gardeners were knocking at the door with sheaves and pots of exotic blooms. . . . "Will her ladyship accept——" . . . "Her ladyship was pleased to admire——"

"I'm sorry," said Joanna to her mother-in-law. "I hope all this has no sinister significance. What do I do about it?"

"Esther will write for you and acknowledge the flowers," said Lady Lusca, "and will make it clear that your name is not to be used in selling the things to other people."

"Good heavens, would they do that?"

"As supplied to Joanna, Lady Lusca, or even 'Recommended by Joanna, Countess of Lusca.' You must learn to be always on your guard against advertisement. They know better than to try it with me after all these years."

In the hall Esther was still fluttering about, complaining to Graystead. A distant relative of Lady Lusca's, in years she was a dim sixty, but with long practice in self-deception she had brought herself to believe that most people took her for about forty-two.

"All these chrysanthemums! Where are we to put them? And Lady Lusca dislikes chrysanthemums so much—the odour. I mean, half a dozen or so of blooms are neither here nor there, but dozens and dozens—too overwhelming." She looked disparagingly at Joanna. "Where does your ladyship wish to have these put?"

Joanna flamed inwardly. She could have crushed Esther with a scathing retort, but she controlled her feelings. She did not even say the obvious thing; "Why do you call me 'your ladyship'?" You are not a servant. What you mean is that you will not bring yourself to give me my proper title; you grudge me the name of Lady Lusca."

How my character seems to have changed for the better, thought Joanna! Imagine Jon Lewalter becoming tolerant and self-controlled, or even stopping to think before she strikes. But I should only make Esther my enemy for life, and I've made too many enemies in my time. I have to live with people now; I can't walk away from my battlefields."

She said, "If you don't like them, can't we give them away?"

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"Give them away?" wailed Esther. "Who do you want to give them to? The hospital? It means the car running about all day to-morrow, and——"

"I wasn't thinking about the hospital, or the car. There are enough people in this house. Give them to Graystead."

"To Graystead! But——"

"You can have all these chrysanthemums, Graystead," said Joanna, smiling graciously.

The butler grinned. "Thank you, my lady."

"Tch . . . tch . . . tch!" said Esther. "Really . . . really . . ."

"To think that I used to like chrysanthemums!" mused Joanna, mounting the stairs.

But Esther had the last word. When later Joanna went to bed she discovered that what is known in floral circles as a "bank" of chrysanthemums, shading tastefully from pink to burgundy red, had been erected in her room between the fireplace and the window. It gave the whole place a rather cloying, Hollywood look.

"I know what Mummy would have done with these," thought Joanna; "she'd have hurled them all out of the window."

She pulled back the green curtains and tentatively opened a casement upon the misty autumn night. Then she drew back . . . no, she dare not. No longer could she behave in that old irresponsible way.

These people—Hubert's people—wanted her. It didn't make sense, but they wanted her. From the first they had been gracious enough to accept her, though they must have hoped that Hubert would marry a girl out of their own set. It was only the feeling that by staying here she was doing them some kind of a service that made her able to swallow incidents like this chrysanthemum business. Swallow all resentments, she would . . . every swallow a penance for the old Give-as-good-as-you-get Jon.

If only she could make herself believe that nothing mattered very much . . . if only she could be indifferent, unmoved. But she was too vital, too ardent, too intense. She wanted to live; and here she was, doomed to passivity.

In a way its my own fault, she told herself. It's being too self-conscious . . . too touchy . . . caring too much about what I feel. To think I was once such a fool as to imagine it would be easy to live this life, for which I'm as utterly unfitted as a Hot-tentot! And yet I'm too much of a coward to face the other . . . the cold wind blowing on me, and having no one to fall back on or make out for me. Oh Mummy, Mummy—it's turned out such a mess . . . you running round and carolling in delight because

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your daughter married into the British aristocracy ; you, with that darling obtuseness which makes you happy just to grab all you can and enjoy it, and perhaps even a little bit glad to get rid of an uncomfortable daughter who wouldn't go with you all the way . . . who developed that out-of-date thing, a conscience ! How you'd love this room, Mummy. I can see you flitting about, touching everything, exclaiming at the quality . . . but it's a bit of a tomb all the same, and I'm not much more than a ghost. . . .

So her thoughts coldly crystallised as she jerked back the curtains with a rattle of rings, and slowly walked up and down the room puffing out tobacco smoke disdainfully into the faces of those smug chrysanthemums.

I am getting, she told herself, what I deserve . . . and then stopped short at the realisation that she was undoubtedly getting much more than she deserved. A humbling thought, it made things worse than ever. It carried her through the next few days in a passion of self-abnegation, of devotion to her mother-in-law's every whim.

Autumn had made the weather bleak and unfriendly, and upon a cold afternoon there arrived guests, a Colonel and Mrs. Mam-bury, old friends of the family.

"So, Constance, this is your daughter-in-law ?"

"Yes, this is Joanna."

"Poor Hubert's wife. . . . I wish we had met you under happier circumstances, my dear."

(What was the answer to that ? thought Joanna.) Silently glancing up, she resumed operations with canvas and embroidery scissors.

"What beautiful work ! So few people have time for needle-work in these days."

(And I only brought it out for her benefit !) Aloud Joanna said meekly, "I'm afraid I began it years ago. It is one of those things that never gets finished."

"A chair seat ? Is it one of a set ?"

"You might call it the first of a set ; but the chair it was intended for has disappeared out of my life long ago."

"There's one thing I will say for you, Constance," said the Colonel in his prim, rather high-pitched voice ; "you never talk about needlework."

"Perhaps I talk about less worthy things ?" suggested Lady Lusca ; "The weather, and my neighbours' affairs."

"Talking of affairs, we've had a wedding at Covelake. You'll never guess who !"

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"Oh, don't tell her!" implored Mrs. Mambury. "Let her guess."

"You know I'm quite incapable of guessing . . . not *the* bachelor, George Randolph?"

"Oh, you knew! Someone told you!"

"Indeed, no one told me. Am I right? Whom has he married?"

"A Miss Percy."

"Oh? One of the Northumberland Percys?"

"No. No, indeed. She comes from Warwickshire; he met her at a dance at Warwick Castle."

"From Warwickshire? Percy? I don't know any Percys in Warwickshire. Are you sure the name is Percy?"

"Yes. Her mother was a Masson."

"Oh, a *Masson*. We knew Sir John Masson very well in the old days. A great rider."

"Yes, Sir John is her grandfather. Actually he gave her away. A lovely wedding; everyone was there."

"How strange I didn't read about it in *The Times*. But I don't understand these *Percys*."

"Well, I think it's like this . . . the girl's mother——"

(I can't believe it! Joanna was saying to herself. It's like Jane Austen. Two wars and a changed world, and people still taking this passionate interest in Miss Percy of Warwickshire and Sir John somebody of God knows where. . . .)

"And how are the Miss Cullingworths?"

"Oh, quite well, and they've got Manningham Lodge looking so sweet with all David's nice old furniture, but they're very worried about what can have happened to their house in France."

"Can't they find out?"

"Not yet. And things must have been dreadful on the Riviera."

"Was their house at Cannes? I forget."

"No, a little place Le Crisel, near Antibes."

"I don't know it. . . . Joanna, what *is* the matter?"

"I'm sorry . . . I seem to be dropping everything."

"I thought you made an exclamation."

Joanna spanned her temples with thumb and middle finger, and stooped to pick up scissors, needle, and wool.

"Joanna was in France all through the war; in Paris."

Mrs. Mambury widened her eyes expressively. She was that unfortunate type of dark-haired woman who ages quickly; in youth slender, olive, and brunette, in middle-age she was scrawny,

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sallow, her hair a dead, streaky grey, her mouth nervous, constantly twitching, her eyes gone small and heavy-lidded. She was dressed in an expensive, ageless outfit of mole-coloured woollen trimmed with sable, and her shoes and gloves were so perfect that it made you wonder where she got such good value for her coupons.

"In Paris! But it must have been sensational?"

"No, it quite truly was not. We saw very little of what your newspapers described as life under the Germans. Often it was monotonous; just the old problems of eating and keeping warm."

"Is it true," asked the Colonel, "that the German officers ate caviare every night at the Ritz?"

"Possibly. I didn't eat caviare with German officers at the Ritz."

"Oh, very good . . . very amusing!"

Joanna flushed, dragging at a knot in her work.

"Did you," persisted the Colonel, "meet any members of the Resistance movement?"

"Rather a difficult question to answer," said Joanna. "They didn't advertise themselves as such."

"No, no . . . foolish of me. But perhaps you sensed?"

"One had one's—suspicions."

Mrs. Mambury leapt in. "And didn't I hear somewhere that your mother was a famous singer?"

"The famous singer," said Lady Lusca with unusual fervour; "the divine Anny Bisset. The only soprano I ever cared to listen to."

(So that was it! thought Joanna. And I wasn't even a Warwickshire Percy.)

"And do you sing, too?"

"No," said Joanna.

"But she plays the piano *quite* nicely . . . Scarlatti. I do so dislike emotional pianists," said Lady Lusca.

"Ah!" said Mrs. Mambury. "I remember how fond Hubert was of music. . . ."

(That was another thing . . . Hubert being "fond of music." Hubert who flatly refused to listen to anything but his own idea of the last word in music, which was Romeo Ray's Tea-time Orchestra playing a selection from "The Desert Song," or a really juicy cinema organ throbbing out "If my words had wings." How long could she have stood it? And he had that awful trick of getting a popular tune on his brain and humming and chanting it for days . . . on their honeymoon in the flat it had been "Lili

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Marlene," and she had rushed round shutting the windows because Hubert wouldn't understand that to the neighbours it was a *German* song. . . . Was it possible—thinking back—that Hubert was just the least bit obtuse? Frightful disloyalty, even to think such a thing . . . and yet—)

"You must have been confoundedly glad to get back to England again," Colonel Mambury was saying.

(Confounded? That was a word that went out in about 1913!)

Joanna tried to smile intelligently.

As though she had only been waiting to get the subject dragged in somehow, Mrs. Mambury was away on a tide of enjoyably melancholy reminiscence.

"All the way down I was thinking of that time Hubert stayed with us at North Berwick—do you remember, Constance? He was about sixteen, and he was frightfully annoyed because North Berwick was a golfing place and not a cricketing place. And do you remember when he had that *craze* for collecting lumps of stone and tapping them with hammers? He filled his school trunk with enormous boulders from Berwick Law—there was something special about them, I forget what. Oh, he was such a dear! What a happy crowd we were that summer—such years ago, but I remember every detail of it distinctly. He couldn't have been *more* than sixteen, so it must have been about 1926. We little knew! And when he got his commission in the R.A.F. he spent two nights with us at Covelake on his way to some weird camp in the north, and I remember how the servants all fell over each other to wait on him, he had *such* a way with people, hadn't he? *We* never got service like that, did we, Laurie? It was a new light on our staff. I remember the very last thing he ever said to me, and though, of course, I didn't know it was the very last, I'm so glad I remember it; he said, 'Auntie Peter'—he always called me Auntie Peter, ever since he was a little boy, and I don't know to this day why—he said, 'Auntie Peter, I'll do as much for you some day.' Just like that—'I'll do as much for you some day.' Wasn't it beautiful?"

"He little knew," said the Colonel. "None of us did."

"Constance, darling," said Mrs. Mambury, "does this upset you?"

"Not at all. It would be a pity if I could find no pleasure in thinking about the past."

"And this poor girl? My dear, tell me I haven't hurt you by all these recollections?"

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"You knew him before I did," said Joanna.

At that moment there were sounds of arrival in the hall, and everybody looked up with interest as the door opened.

It was Isabel. She came in confidently, followed by her two elder daughters.

"Hallo," she said breezily. "I hope I'm not interrupting. I didn't know you had guests."

Lady Luscy rose, so did everybody else automatically.

"Only some old friends—Colonel and Mrs. Mambury. . . . I don't think you've met. This is Lady Luscy; I should say, the new Countess."

"Or perhaps the *newest* Countess would be nearer the mark," said Isabel with surprising tactlessness. "Do sit down," she added, carelessly scooping up an unintended tribute. "How do you do? And what a divine fire for a thoroughly chilly autumn day. These are some of my small fry . . . children, go and find Esther or somebody. Have you come a long way? I wondered whose car it was outside."

With Isabel a rush of vitality had invaded the room; it might have been bracing or merely draughty. She wore a dashing coat of yellow-and-black tweed and a hat straight from the pages of *Vogue*. She looked very striking indeed.

"You'll stay for tea, won't you?" asked Lady Luscy.

"No, thank you; I prefer to walk back in the daylight. What I came about is this, we keep finding locked cupboards and things, and the housekeeper insists for some obscure reason that you have the keys. Do you know anything about them?"

"Keys? I haven't any keys belonging to the Park. Mrs. Glenison must have had them and lost them."

"There! I knew she was having hallucinations. Am I justified in getting the cupboards forcibly opened?"

"Certainly. They're your cupboards. And if you encounter any arguments, tell Mrs. Glenison to come and see me."

"Thank you," said Isabel. "We shall eventually get ourselves organised. I'm quite sure that the children already know the interior of the house much better than I do; I never was any good at geography. There ought to be a map."

"How many children have you?" asked Mrs. Mambury brightly.

"Four," said Isabel bluntly. "All girls."

"Oh . . . what bright little things those two looked."

"They're perfectly ordinary children," said Isabel. "They have neither good looks nor—I fear—brains. So don't try to

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make the best of a bad job by telling me how proud I'll be when they take London by storm in about fifteen years time. My best line will be to turn them out nice, wholesome country girls and marry them off into the hunting set."

"Oh, very good! Very amusing!" said Colonel Mambury in his prim voice.

Isabel eyed him, putting on her gloves again.

"I suppose you haven't got four daughters, Colonel?"

"No, no, indeed."

"Well, you don't know the meaning of that word, 'amusing.' And now I must go; I've completely broken up your peaceful afternoon. Joanna, why don't you come back with me across the park?"

"Shall I?"

"Yes, my dear, do," said Lady Lusca.

The two younger women paused at the door.

"Good-bye," said Isabel. "Good-bye, Mrs. Mambury. Good-bye, Colonel Mambury. You must come and visit me some time, only don't come in the winter if you value your health, because I swear that house of ours fairly reeks of pneumonia and arthritis. It's as damp as Dante's inferno."

"Such a vital personality!" said Mrs. Mambury as the door closed.

"I like an original woman," said the Colonel.

"I'm sure you're ready for tea," said Lady Lusca ringing the bell.

In the hall Isabel turned to Joanna and said, "I shall keep you for tea and send you back in the car."

"Ought I? Supposing I'm wanted here?"

"Oh, don't be one of those scruple-women! . . . Graystead, have somebody fetch a coat for her ladyship," said Isabel, launching out upon a career for which she afterwards became famous, that of giving orders in other people's houses.

"Very good, my lady."

"And find my infants. They're probably with Esther, and I'm perfectly certain that wherever they are they're eating!"

At that moment Esther appeared between the white pillars at the back of the hall, smiling smugly, a child in either hand.

"*Mon dieu!*" said Isabel. "They're chewing. What on earth have you given them, Esther?"

"Just a few chocolates, Lady Lusca. Quite good, wholesome ones."

"I don't doubt that. Lavinia! Georgina! You know

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you've no business to take people's sweet ration, you utter little sharks." Isabel swept the children before her out of the house, collecting as she went the lead of a large, white, doleful-looking dog.

They came out of the garden into the park where the red sun was just setting coldly beyond the ancient oaks, and the very air was faintly rosy and tinged their faces. The long vistas of the park attracted the children who, taking the dog, began to run; mist rose about their flying feet so that they and the dog looked elfin and unreal.

"Listen, Joanna," said Isabel, "I've got an idea. You know the old lady is going to present me next year. You must get her to do the same for you."

"It's out of the question," said Joanna; "she wouldn't even consider it now."

"Why on earth not?"

"Well . . . I'm out of circulation."

"You will be if you're not careful. Have you sounded her at all?"

"Enough to know her views. Widows are not presented."

"I cannot see why not."

"It isn't any use."

"Being presented isn't any use! Why, you can't have much of a time without. Being presented launches you; if you're not launched, people think there's something wrong with you and you don't get any invitations."

"I'm not likely to get any of the kind of invitations you mean. And I didn't mean that being presented wasn't any use; I meant that it wasn't any use my expecting it. Much good would it do me! Actually I should hate it."

"Well . . . if you say so. But my dear Joanna, though I'm hardly a relative of yours, I intend to talk to you as though I were. I think you're making a big mistake in letting the old lady get the upper hand like you do."

"You know nothing about it, Isabel. My husband is dead; he left me to her, and her to me. The least I can do is to respect her wishes. She has given me a home and a background."

"Hubert gave you the latter, surely! You'll always be Joanna, Countess of Lusca." "

(What! You too, thought Joanna!)

"And," went on Isabel, "you ought to have a tidy income, too. Why don't you set up on your own?"

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"I'm sorry, Isabel, but I hate discussing this. Either we'll talk about something else or I'll go back."

"I swear I didn't mean to be offensive," said Isabel. "I'm sorry if I stirred you up, but I feel there's so much in you, Joanna, and it seems to me utterly silly that a girl like you—but I'm up against the red light again. I may as well say that I admire you frightfully for your loyalty to Hubert's memory. There aren't many women like you in these days; Constance ought to dither with pride every time she looks at you. The other day at the christening, when I saw you standing there so icy and dignified, I thought to myself, I wonder what sort of a widow I'd make if—say—Simon got knocked off in an accident? It seems a comic thing to think about at your child's christening, but it's a good thing we can't see into most people's minds on solemn occasions or the world would be a sort of perpetual Itma programme. Well, I tell you, Joanna, I should be kicking against my weeds in six weeks, and no lack of respect to Simon's memory, either. I'd grab all that was left to me from life, and know that Simon would understand and want me to have it."

"You know you would not, Isabel."

"Why not? What do you mean?"

"Because of that!" Joanna stood still, looking straight in front of her. Isabel looked too, at Darchingham Park looming out of the mist with its solemn walls and towers.

"You're morbidly right, Joanna."

"It isn't morbidity; it's tradition."

"How well you've learnt your lesson! Who was the teacher—Barbara, I'll be bound! You know, you and I have got a lot in common; we weren't born to this. We're only Lusays by adoption."

"All the more obligation."

Isabel sighed. "What an uncomfortably moral person you are. Any more cracks about duty? They didn't bring me up on the same copybook at school. But I've got a shrewd idea that you're trying to convince yourself with all these lofty precepts, as well as me."

Isabel paused a moment, and added, "Let's have it out; do you feel any resentment towards me?"

"No," said Joanna; "I can't say that I do. Should I? And why?"

"Because you missed it, and I got it. I thought you might have felt like averting your eyes."

"I'm not very good at averting my eyes, as it happens."

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"Broad-minded?"

"There's no such thing. Either your mind is free or it isn't. If it isn't free it probably likes to call itself broad-minded, meaning it wants to enjoy being mildly shocked. Nothing in this world could shock me, or make me avert my eyes."

"Oh," said Isabel, "you sound very experienced."

"I've tried to work things out. I've had plenty of time to think lately."

The sun, almost on a level with their eyes, turned all the under sides of the clouds a glowing pink.

"You don't," said Isabel, "look the kind of person who would accept things as they are."

"But that is just the kind of person I want to look," said Joanna; "because I've been accepting things for quite a long time."

"Seven months, in fact."

"Well—yes," said Joanna, though she had not actually been thinking of Hubert's death.

"Tough . . ." said Isabel thoughtfully. "You can count on me. Everybody needs a friend—sooner or later."

An hour afterwards, being ushered into the Rolls for the short drive back to the Dower House, Joanna decided that Isabel's bluff manner was a pose while her sense of propriety was strong. It was unthinkable that a Lady Lusca should walk back home alone and after dusk; Isabel showed herself a true member of the family in this. Isabel was shrewd; you would never find her disagreeing with her background.

The car sped down the drive, tunnel-like with overhanging beeches.

Joanna spoke into the tube. "The door isn't properly fastened; will you stop, please?"

Instantly the chauffeur was at her side, apologetic. He was a man of about sixty, very trim, fresh-faced, and with a kind of natural dignity.

"I'm very sorry, my lady. Tell you the truth, this is a new car to me; I'll have to see to that door. It's his present lordship's car, you see. His late lordship—I mean, the father of—I'm sorry, my lady—"

Joanna smiled. "It's awfully confusing . . . so many in such a short time. Were you here with my husband's father?"

The man's face lit up. "Oh yes, my lady. And my father was coachman to his father, and my grandfather to his grandfather. We Philmores have lived in our house since 1682."

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"Which house is that?"

"Salt Farm, my lady. Just outside the west gate."

"That lovely house! I've always admired it. Could I ever see inside it?"

"Oh, my lady, we'd be honoured. Any time. I'll tell my wife."

"I'd like to come to-morrow," said Joanna, and bit her lip, wondering if she was contemplating a transgression.

He re-arranged her rugs.

"You'll pardon me, my lady, but I can't let this opportunity pass without telling you how—how sorry we all are for you . . . because of Mr. Hubert. Oh, you'll have to forgive me for calling him that—it slipped out, like it was in the old days before he became his lordship. I taught him to drive a car, you see; and we old tenants were privileged. A bit free and easy perhaps, but when they were children they were just Barbara and Hubert to us."

"Thank you," said Joanna. "You can always call him Hubert to me."

"Thank *you*, my lady."

She frowned, suddenly hating the horrible obsequiousness of the title.

"He was a very friendly person," she said.

"Yes, he was. There'll never be another one so popular. I thought it would be a comfort to you to know how much we all thought of him. He used to come into our house on baking day and pinch the fresh cakes off the rack; he said he never got anything so good anywhere else. His death was a sad, tragic thing, my lady; we've never ceased to mourn him and never will. I'm glad I've had the opportunity to tell you this, and to say—if you'll forgive me—how much we all admire your ladyship. Such a picture of grace and dignity in your grief."

She cried in genuine alarm, "Oh, you mustn't flatter me!"

"I wouldn't stoop to flattery," he said in his quiet, pleasing voice. "You'd have made a perfect countess for our Mr. Hubert, my lady, just as now you've become his perfect widow."

"Thank you," she said in a stifled voice. "Perhaps you'd better drive on now; it's getting late."

Frowning, she pulled her gloves off, and on, and off again. The worst yet! So that was the effect she had achieved. . . . the perfect widow! Well, wasn't it what she had aimed at? Yes, but not to be quite so inhuman, so alarmingly impeccable. Having slain and buried the old Joanna, there was surely no need to put a

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negative personality in her place, a doll that people could describe as the Perfect Widow. Her heart leapt wildly, clamouring for the old, debonair, irresponsible self, for the Great Joanna, wonderful Jon, who had been cast off for ever.

She pressed her lips together, and suddenly felt very miserable. Seven devils thrown out . . . and now—oh God, this awful emptiness, this bare, echoing cavern of a heart !

VI

Seated in another car, three weeks later, being wafted towards Yorkshire and Barbara's home, Joanna found her view irritatingly obscured by the back of Proudfoot, her maid. Aged fiftyish, the old-fashioned sort, good at hair-dressing and pressing, and with socially irreproachable references, Proudfoot had been chosen by Constance, Lady Lusca for her daughter-in-law. She would prove, Joanna was quite sure, an efficient chaperone and would report any indiscretions. There she sat beside Edwards, the chauffeur, in her suitable navy-blue coat and hat, the latter distorted and bulging with the bun of hair which jutted out from the back of her head.

It was only two days since they had sat at breakfast, Lady Lusca reading a letter from her daughter, while motherly affection battled with exasperation at one who started off with about six lines to a page and finished up by cramming eight illegible lines into an inch of space, showing an unbalanced personality.

"Any news from dear Barbara?" asked Esther, fussing over her usual breakfast of one shredded wheat roll, salted and milked.

"Oh, nothing but the children as usual. Gerald has got colours for something at school—I can't make out the crucial word . . . and something about Roger's chest. Caroline has had a cold, and her temperature—it looks like 108, but it can't be—and Susan is going to have singing lessons—or is it swimming lessons? It starts with 's'; it may be shooting lessons. Nanny is going to be—what is it?—oh, married . . . good gracious! She's been with them for years . . . and will I ask people round here if they can recommend another. Eileen rode in the under-sevens in the gymkhana and got special mention, which was quite good as it was her first appearance in public. I'm sure Barbara's

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pen must be nearly white-hot by the time she has finished a letter, by the rate she drives it, as though somebody's life were at stake. What do you make of that word, Esther?"

"'Adenoids,'" said Esther promptly, dropping her spoon with a splash into her delicate Coalport porridge bowl.

"It can't be. She's talking about the garden; it must be a plant . . . oh, I see what it is, it's 'afterwards.' And here's something for you, Joanna; Barbara wants you to go and stay with her at once, this week, because the boys are at home for four days for the half-term holiday—though what attraction that will be to you I can't imagine. Barbara seems to think that other people ought to be as enthusiastic about her children as she is. Don't go if you don't want to."

"I think I should like to go."

"Very well. Then Esther shall send a wire, and you can start the day after to-morrow. Edwards will drive you up and leave you at Keckwith Hall. Esther, tell Proudfoot to pack for a week; she'll go too, of course—though she'll have nothing to do at Barbara's, for they neither dress nor entertain, in the accepted sense of the words and it's all just like a boarding school. And Esther, what was the name of that hotel on the way where I stayed for luncheon last time—not a bad place at all?"

"Do you mean the *Royal Hind* at Lisbrook, Lady Lusca?"

"That was it. Ring them up, and order luncheon in a private room on Friday for Lady Lusca, and something for two servants in the steward's room."

The arrangements for her journey interested Joanna very little. Now, bored with her three hours' drive, hungry, as the hands of her watch crawled on towards one o'clock, Joanna in the depths of the car gazed ruefully at her maid's back and wondered whether she would find any joy in her visit to Barbara.

Joy? Why should she expect joy? She had a good deal of penance to do before that particular word could come back into her vocabulary. The joy in living which she had once known had been turned by one act of cowardice into a weight of remorse. She could watch herself, getting duller and harder, unable to shake off the pressure of months and years which inevitably would end in making her morbid. That in itself was a punishment for one so brilliant of wit, so gay of heart.

Hubert's death was, of course, part of the plan to bring her down. It was she, in that case, who was responsible for Hubert's death, for he was doomed from the day he married her, *because* his death was the only thing that could make her stop to think.

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Hubert had to die so that Joanna Lewalter might commence the slow, unremitting payment of all her past debts of honour.

The thought was as repulsive as her constantly reiterated widowhood, the sense of being a precious chattel, at everybody's disposal but her own.

When had she begun to think like this? Quite truthfully, within an hour of the arrival of the telegram at the house in Henriques Place.

She had thought at first, why, why, why? . . . And in a flash the answer had come. . . . This is for you, Jon. You had better take it. It's the beginning . . . so pay up!

That last leave of his had been fun. They had rushed straight to London from Darchingham as soon as they heard he was coming, and just ten minutes after their arrival he had leapt out of a taxi, with his radiant face. Money, fun, love . . . pour them out; let them flow.

Hubert knew where you could get good food, even in February, 1945. He had bought her a scarlet suit and shoes to match with his "special" coupons. She had worn the suit at Boulestin's that last night of his leave; she had never worn it again. . . .

Everything of the best on that leave . . . bar the rocket bombs.

Hubert had been found dead on a Sunday, just nine days later. He had been missing on reconnaissance for forty-eight hours, and then a party of soldiers had come upon his body beside the burnt out plane, and buried it there in the forest of Devers where he had crashed.

All this had come out later. The original telegram was brief enough . . . "The War Office regrets to inform you . . ."

Graystead, knowing what it was, had handed it to Esther, and Esther knowing what it was, had started to climb the stairs and had stuck there, half-way up the flight, whimpering, "I can't . . . I can't!"

They broke the news to Joanna when she came in from attending a charity *matinée*; they stood round her, as though they expected her to swoon. She looked from one to another without speaking, and then pushed her way through them and went to her room. Lady Luscy followed her, the mother with superb control laying aside her own grief for the sake of the wife.

"My dear child . . ." she had said. "My dear child."

Joanna hid her face in her hands, thinking, "It is worse for her than for me."

They put her to bed, and she lay with her face buried in the

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lavender-scented pillow, cold and stunned, unable to sleep even after taking the sachet the doctor had ordered for her.

It has come, she thought; it has caught me up at last. Her brain had never felt clearer than in those grim moments when the new Joanna stood, stripped of pretence, before the uninviting future, leaving the old care-free Joanna in the past.

But that was seven, eight, *nine* months ago.

And what a fool, what a poor fool, to remember it now!

She noticed that Proudfoot was mouthing at her through the glass screen, and taking the tube asked, "What's the matter?"

Proudfoot coiled herself round the chauffeur's shoulders to reach the speaking-tube, and shrieked, "Edwards says is he going too fast for your ladyship?"

"Of course not," said Joanna curtly. "What does he think I am—a nerve case? Are we nearly at the hotel? It's one o'clock."

She watched Proudfoot transfer her mouth to within an inch of the chauffeur's ear, passing on the question; then the answer was relayed, "About another four miles, my lady."

Why on earth couldn't he have told me himself she thought with exasperation? It's like getting an audience with the Pope.

Instantly she subdued the brief mental rebellion; it could only lead to disaster.

"We're there, my lady," Proudfoot leaned across to announce, quite unnecessarily, for the *Royal Hind* was staring them in the face.

Edwards descended and opened the door of the car.

"I'd better go in and see that everything's as arranged for your ladyship," said the maid.

Joanna subdued her impatience until Proudfoot returned after five minutes with a face registering disaster.

"Oh, my lady, what shall we do? There's been a mistake. They haven't reserved a private room. They haven't got a private room available, except a very untidy small apartment with no fire. Had we better go on and find another place?"

"We're going no further," said Joanna firmly. "I'm starving. I suppose there's a public dining-room?"

"Well yes, my lady, but——"

"All right, I'll have luncheon there. Go and get yours, and be ready to start one hour from now. Now, don't argue, Proudfoot; we're wasting time."

She walked into the hotel. The waiter at the dining-room

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door said, "Sorry, madam, but we're full for the moment. If you'll wait——"

"There's a small table there," she said.

"Yes, but one seat is taken."

"Can't I have the other seat?"

"Well, if you don't mind sharing, madam."

"I don't mind if the other person doesn't."

"It's a gentleman. I think he's gone to the telephone."

She took the vacant seat, slung her furs over the back of the chair, and pulled off her hat, shaking free her swinging hair. A strange and pleasant sensation seemed to fill her whole being. For a moment she could not recognise it, then suddenly she realised.

The waiter had called her madam! No one knew her here. She was free, just an ordinary person of no particular interest or importance. It was like going out for a moment into the open air from a room oppressively hot. The happiness persisted as she looked round the room at the other people and listened to the chatter of voices and the clink of plates. This was an unexpected treat; something she hadn't deserved. She felt grateful and humble in her happiness. A new blessing—anonymity.

The menu was lying in the opposite place to her own. She picked it up and saw that it was covered with little drawings, each consisting of a few swift lines only . . . people eating, smoking, looking bored, hungry, expectant.

Her whole face broke into a smile; then looking up with surprise she saw at the next table the model from which a particularly rich sketch had been taken, an elderly man with tufted eyebrows and protruding jaw, napkin tucked into neck, and overloaded fork half-way between plate and gaping mouth.

Yes! They were all here, all the funny or striking types in the dining-room. The likenesses were perfect, and how quickly they must have been done, while the artist was waiting to be served.

"Yes, madam?"

The waiter was at her side. Hastily she switched her attention from the sketches to the bill of fare.

"I'll have celery soup . . . cold galantine . . . salad."

"Thank you, madam. Anything to drink?"

"Oh . . . lager, cider . . . anything."

"Waiter! The same for me."

The man opposite was taking his seat; he had come up unnoticed, a youngish, rather unattractive man with untidy black hair, piercing eyes, a truculent jaw and deplorable tweed clothes.

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"I'm sorry. I took your menu." She held it out. "I've been so entertained by the sketches. They're very good."

He took it from her without smiling, and laid it by his plate.

"I'm glad you think so." His voice was cultured but with a certain roughness, and it had a slight accent which eluded her, familiar as she was with continental accents. "Do you know anything about drawing?"

She answered coolly, "I used to know Gabriel Rule quite well in Paris. He was a great friend of my mother's. And I knew the brothers Vervier, I often saw them at work."

"Point to you," he answered. "I don't consider myself in the same class with Gabriel Rule and the brothers Vervier. By the way, didn't they get into trouble for collaborating? Doing drawings for the Nazis or something?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Is that what the papers said? You should have seen those drawings; absolute caricatures, very subtle. In any case, why shouldn't they draw Nazis? Art is universal. You don't protest when an artist draws sharks, or lepers."

"That's true."

"Richelieu said, '*Pour tromper un rival l'artifice est permis, On peut tout employer contre ses ennemis*'—we may employ artifice to deceive a rival, and any means to deceive our enemies."

"I suppose the enemy was often deceived?"

"They hadn't the wit of the French. They couldn't understand it."

"Some amazing stories have come out of France. I know a man who lived there during the occupation; he had a terrible time, but bluffed it out. Who was it who said, 'audacity, audacity, and yet more audacity'?"

"That was Danton. He also said, 'Let my name be blighted so long as France is free.' It's amazing how historical situations repeat themselves."

"I thought Danton was an undesirable character?"

"Who knows? He's dead; he can't clear himself. DeLille said, '*Tremblez, tyrans! Vous êtes immortels.*'"

His rather hard and challenging look relaxed into a smile.

"It's stimulating to meet one so well up in French literature."

"I don't usually interlard my conversation with quotations," she said in an amused voice; "I forget how all this began."

"You began it with Richelieu, *à propos* of the sly art of the

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brothers Vervier, and I told you I knew a man who lived in Paris under the Germans."

"It must have been uncomfortable for him."

"He doesn't talk about it much."

"Very wise of him, I should think."

"How well do you know Paris?"

"Like my two thumbs. I lived there for years."

"During the occupation! Oh heavens! Forgive me. I once stayed there for a month and saw Gabriel Rule at work in his studio in the Rue des Saints-Pères. Where did you live in Paris?"

"With my mother in an apartment."

"You don't care to say where perhaps?"

"Not at all. It was just that I knew if I said Place du Parc it wouldn't convey anything to you. Actually it was a very small terrace of old houses off the Avenue d'Étoile. Does that mean anything to you?"

"Not very much. It sounds classy."

"It was classy, as you say, but then my mother was a very well-known singer. Anny Bisset."

"I'm sorry. I never heard of her."

The waiter brought the soup, and they shuffled and dealt the condiments.

He glanced up. "I apologise if that remark sounded curt. It is just that I never had time for all worlds."

She smiled. "You're a professional?"

"Yes. I try to paint—portraits. But the commercial drawing is bread and butter. I've never yet painted anybody who could afford to pay. But I've got a number of quite good portraits together and some day I'm going to take a gallery and have a one-man, one-day exhibition in London."

"And then you will get a lot of good commissions?"

"What an optimist you are."

"Oh, don't be humble. You know whether you're good or not."

He finished his soup, and putting down the spoon said, "Listen. You're just going to tell me that you're a pupil of Gabriel Rule and a winner of every *prix* in the French Academy!"

"You're utterly wrong. I couldn't draw a potato."

"I'm rather relieved. But with those hands you must do something?"

"No. I'm idle. Unemployed."

"My advice to you is to get something quick, before you moulder away."

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"Thanks," she said, drily. "I've sometimes had the same idea myself."

She looked at him under her eyelashes as he, unconscious of the scrutiny, buttered a roll. He was a type difficult to place, though she had always been interested in types and faces.

An intense and rather aggressive masculinity was his main characteristic; not that his face was rugged or even the face of a man of action, a fighter. He had the high forehead of the scholar under fine but shaggy hair, and its many lines were due to the nervous habits of concentrated thought rather than to a too-hardly lived life. The eyes, deep set, were his most belligerent feature; there was something of the bared dagger in their wary depths. For the rest, it was a well-planned face though one with which its owner had ever dealt carelessly. A disturbing face, an individual face, a clouded face which could, possibly and by some unspecified agency, be illumined.

What am I thinking of, thought Joanna! Her own face in these days would bear little scrutiny. It, too, must be dull and unillumined, for there had been no light within for these nine months or more. She went back rather bitterly to the time when, after the receipt of the second telegram confirming Hubert's death, they had rushed her away from London to Darchingham, to a period of chilly mourning which would have wiped out a weaker widow. They had made her into a kind of invalid in that silvery bedroom meant for the bride; she was not expected to appear at breakfast, luncheon was a carefully supervised and secluded family affair, and dinner was invariably served to her in bed. . . . And through it all I lived! thought Joanna.

She came back with a jerk to her present surroundings.

"Thoughts are so much easier than actions, aren't they?" she said with an air of careless challenge.

"Cynical?" he asked, not offensively.

"No. Just tart, like grape-fruit without sugar."

"Well . . . either you believe in yourself or you don't. If you don't, God help you."

"Believing in yourself, in my opinion, is running down a mountain-side backwards. You can't see where you're going and the pace quickens. You finish the journey on your neck."

"So that's how it worked out for you?" He shook salad dressing deliberately upon the two lettuce leaves which flanked his galantine.

"Believe me, I was generalising," she said quickly.

"From the particular to the general is usually the case."

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You have to be something of a psychologist or you can't paint portraits."

"Do you give yourself pep talks while you paint?"

"No, no. The pep talks are for the sitter. Have you ever been painted?"

"I've been drawn several times—just studies, you know. A kind of free model to practice on."

He picked up his pencil and made a few strokes on a blank bit of the rather loaded menu, then frowned.

"I can't get you. The general outline, yes, but not the elusive expression."

"That looks quite good of me."

"Oh, you lend yourself to an effective outline. Those long, mournful eyes . . . nice hollowed cheeks . . . snaky mouth . . . and your hair swirling down to your shoulders and curving up at the ends with a kind of lyrical lift," he said, with a detachment which made the remarks quite impersonal and inoffensive.

"Have you ever painted yourself?" she asked. "Every exhibition ought to have a 'Portrait of the Artist, by Himself' in rather gloomy oils."

"Heaven forbid. I never look in a mirror."

"Well, do sometime. You'd find it interesting."

"The humiliation would end my career." An angry light flashed in his eyes. "I have the strongest reasons for not wishing to be reminded of my physical existence. Think of me as a mind, a pencil, a paint-brush . . . this scribbled menu card."

"I find that difficult," she said. "Why do you trouble to feed your body if you despise it so?"

"I feed the brain that works the hand that holds the brush. Work is all I care for; it's very satisfying."

"Are you ambitious? You sound rather self-assertive."

"Yes. I have a lot of inferiority to work off."

"You said that with a bite in every word. Is there something you can't forget?"

"Several things."

"This is interesting. You call yourself a psychologist. How would you advise anybody else in the same case as yourself? A sitter, say, who was badly in need of a very superior line of pep talk?"

He looked up with his piercing, dark glance.

"What's the matter with you? Self-depreciation?"

"Hardly. More . . . regrets."

"Everybody has those, in greater or lesser degree according

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to their individual sensibility. I see you're holding out on me. I don't blame you; I can't even take my own lessons."

"What sweet, madam?"

Startled, she looked blankly at the waiter.

"Have you any fresh fruit?"

"No, madam. Cabinet pudding. Flaked rice. Blancmange and custard."

"Any cheese?"

"I'll see, madam."

"Just cheese, and coffee."

"And you, sir?"

"The same for me." He thrust a hand into a sagging pocket. "Will you smoke? I haven't much hopes of the cheese." He offered a creased packet of Players.

"Thank you." He lit the cigarette for her, and she said, "Do you know the limitations of this place from experience?"

"No, I just sensed. I'm in the neighbourhood on business. Being picked up here by a friend in a car at three o'clock. The art editor of a magazine for which I hope to draw illustrations lives here; I've been to visit him. He sets more store by personal contacts than I do. One of the old, old school."

"I like the old, old school better than the new, new school."

"I'm afraid I'm too young for the one and too old for the other."

"An unplaced kind of person?"

"Yes. I'll bet you are too!"

"That's apparently what's wrong with both of us," she said flippantly.

"*You* should have hopes."

"What! An artist judging by appearances!"

"I'm sorry; that was rather superficial of me," he confessed.

"Have you noticed the country about here?"

"No. Is anything the matter with it?"

"I thought it had a soothing quality; rugged and yet gentle. And cows in fields are helpful to the mind. Do you find consolation in nature?"

"Not very much. I've never wandered lonely on a mountain-side, and I've never been a child of nature. Such a lot of what you become temperamentally depends on your early environment. I daresay one turns back to it in times of stress, if there's anything to turn back to. I hardly noticed the country as I came along; I was thinking."

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"You should try a mountain-side sometime; you might get quite a thought. Are you fond of thinking?"

"I don't encourage it; it attacks me of its own accord. I'd come a long way and I was hungry."

"Hunger doesn't make me think, I'm afraid, or I should have chosen the nearest wayside pub where they'd have given me chunks of bread and ham on a bench at the door. I was ordered to come to this place by the friend who is picking me up—and I've found somebody to talk to. There's a reward for every duty bravely done. . . . That waiter's a very long time with your cheese."

"Perhaps he's gone to the Ministry of Food to get permission to serve it."

They looked at one another and laughed.

"Won't it be grand when the rations come off?" he said. "The food situation gets worse, now the war's over."

The waiter came down on them like an alighting rook.

"Sorry, no cheese, madam. Coffee for two?"

Joanna rashly stirred her coffee and raised a greyish sediment.

"For the last half hour," she said, "I've been trying to place your accent. You're not English. It baffles me."

He gave a wry smile. "So I'm a foreigner! Very British of you, I must say."

Her expressive hands made a gesture of denial.

"You misunderstand me. I've lived on the Continent so long, there is no such word as foreigner to me. I only know people, not nationalities. I was interested; but you needn't tell me."

"Have you ever heard an old song? . . .

My heart's in the Highlands, my heart is not here,
My heart's in the Highlands a-chasing the deer."

"Scotland?"

"North of the Clyde."

"I know so little about it."

"So many people know so little about it; hence, what is called the Highland problem."

"I have read 'Rob Roy,' 'John Splendid,' and 'Commander of the Mists.'"

"Then why did you say you knew so little about it? When did *you* find time to read?"

"When I was a child, before I went to France. When I said

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I knew so little about your country I meant that I had never been there."

"Did you enjoy being a child?" he asked curiously.

"Very much. I hadn't any child friends, as my parents were misguided enough to think I might 'pick things up.' We lived in a small manufacturing town. But I was very indulged and had expensive toys, nice clothes, and was never said 'No' to."

He was silent, setting down his empty cup, impatiently pushing back his rough dark hair, his eyes wary and cold.

She thought, he must have had a wretched childhood. Did I have to run on like that? She began to reach for her furs and bag.

He looked up suddenly. "Oh, must you go? We were talking about judging by appearances."

"That was several paragraphs ago."

"I gathered you thought me obtuse. I'm not. May I say something?"

"Of course."

"You *can* wash out regrets."

"And worse than regrets?"

"You don't have to go on paying for the rest of your life."

"I wish I could agree with you. Have you ever even felt the obligation to go on paying?"

"You're hyper-sensitive, that's all it is. Whatever it was, don't let it spoil your life."

She wrapped the furs round her shoulders, swinging back her hair, and said, "I haven't anything you could call a life—now. You have more to look forward to. I'd say to you, it's a long time ago; you should have stopped paying yourself by now."

"I'll remember you said that."

"Do you want your bill, madam?" said the waiter.

She laid a pound note on the salver, glad that her companion had not offered to pay. It seemed to keep their meeting impersonal, unique.

When she had counted her change and tipped the waiter she rose and saw that he was already on his feet.

"I hope the exhibition will make you famous," she said.

"Thank you."

"May I ask a favour? To keep this menu card with the drawings?"

A smile relieved the rather unattractive set of his face.

"Do keep it. Actually it isn't mine to give. I hope the hotel won't need it again."

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"I'll risk that. And will you—this is another favour—will you sign the drawings for me?"

"With pleasure." He took out a pencil and swiftly, in the only blank space on the card, wrote the word 'Bagpipes'.

"Is that your professional name?"

"My commercial name. You may see some of my work if you read the popular press."

"I shall look out for it. . . . Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

In the hall she looked at her watch; she had been five minutes over the hour. Thank goodness Proudfoot had not come fussing in search of her. . . .

"Excuse me, your ladyship! You are Lady Lusca, aren't you?"

A sleek-haired gentleman in black jacket and striped trousers who could only be the manager was descending on her, offering apologies.

"But the mistake was really not ours, Lady Lusca. The letter we received distinctly said the second of November, and this is the first. No day of the week was stated, just the second of November."

He displayed Esther's note; yes, she had put the second.

"It's our mistake, it doesn't matter at all," said Joanna.

"I hope your ladyship was well served. If they had told me——"

"It's quite all right, thank you," she said, anxious to escape. The manager followed her to the door, still explaining. There was the car ready outside, the chauffeur at the wheel and Proudfoot standing looking like a disgruntled horse.

"Good day, good day, Lady Lusca," said the manager, bowing again and again.

"I hope everything was all right, my lady," said Proudfoot, in a voice which suggested that she hadn't any such hopes at all.

"Of course it was all right," said Joanna, getting into the car. Her sense of happiness was fading, but there remained the stimulation of having talked to a real person. The man's personality had impressed her, so that he was not easily forgotten like most chance acquaintances, and she could still hear his rather musical, amused voice. His voice made up for the unattractive bleakness of his face, which presumably had never in childhood been encouraged to set in pleasant lines.

There had been something satisfying in their meeting; the way in which his reserves had matched her own. She felt that

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he was the same kind of person, that he spoke her language. She was glad that he hadn't descended to the commonplace of Who are you? Where are you going? Do you live in London? Or, Shall we meet in town some time and have a drink? He had the right technique for a casual meeting; it was all delicately managed and then tossed away.

Tossed away. . . .

She opened her bag and looked for a moment at the page of funny drawings. "Bagpipes"!

Proudfoot, contorting her features dramatically and trying hard not to point, indicated that their destination was in view.

Keckwith Hall was a large Victorian mansion flanked by a mosque-like conservatory and standing high above a rising paddock. When the car drew up at the entrance, Barbara was seen standing on the steps amid a crowd of children, all clad in jodhpurs or breeches, with polo-necked sweaters.

"I'm delighted to see you, Joanna darling," cried Barbara, affectionately throwing her arms round her sister-in-law's neck and kissing her. "Did you have a decent journey? Aren't you tired of sitting so long? You must be dying for tea."

She led the way up the steps and into the hall where a fire of logs was burning in a huge stone grate; all the children followed.

"Children, here is Aunt Joanna at last," Barbara said gaily. "Meet all the family, Jon, if it isn't too much like the mob scene in 'Ben Hur.' These are my two, Susan and Caroline. These huge boys are Gerald and Roger Woodmyre, Andy's nephews; and this is Eileen Whitman."

"If you had come half an hour ago, Aunt Joanna," said Susan, "you could have helped to feed and water the ponies. But you can do it to-morrow. We look after our own horses, of course."

"All children do their own ponies nowadays," said Caroline.

"If Aunt Joanna changed into her riding things at once," suggested the bigger boy in a clear, imperative voice, "she'd have time for a canter before dark, instead of tea. Brown Betty hasn't been exercised to-day."

"I'm game for another ride," said the smaller boy.

"I did my first jump to-day," said Eileen; "two foot six."

"One foot six," corrected Susan.

"And I've got jodhpurs on. They fit me. They were Caroline's."

"All right, darling," said Barbara with a rueful laugh. "All families have to do handing down in these days, but we needn't

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tell the world. I'll take you up to your room, Jon, and then we'll have tea at once. Do you want tea in the drawing-room, or would you care to have it in the schoolroom with the children? I always do when Andy isn't at home."

(Which relative was it who had said with gentle malice, "Barbara never talks about anything but the children, and the children never talk about anything but horses"?)

Proudfoot fussed upstairs behind her mistress, followed by an elderly man-servant carrying the luggage, into a spacious bedroom overlooking the paddock, carpeted in rose-colour and holding a gleaming four-poster bed of old mahogany, chintz-curtained, a tallboy to match, and many easy chairs. A fire had been lighted in the pink-tiled, old-fashioned grate, and Barbara had placed books on the bed-table, with a silver vase of late dahlias.

"You'll find it a change from Darchingham," said Barbara deprecatingly. "We're pretty rustic here, with a small and definitely countrified staff. When Mother comes to visit me, on rare occasions, I have to put in about a fortnight's intensive polishing up of the maids before I dare let them loose in her presence."

"It's lovely," said Joanna gratefully.

"And you don't mind tea in the schoolroom? I think it's such fun."

The schoolroom *was* rather fun with its intimate warmth and brightness, the gay fire, the checked yellow and blue table-cloth, the large yellow cups and saucers, the plates of hot scones, the honey, and home-made cake. The square-faced, blonde Nanny sat down with them, preening herself in the presence of yet another distinguished visitor; and there was also the governess, Miss Lockhart, an agreeable girl of outstandingly clean appearance, with hot brown eyes, prominent teeth, and an obvious crush on Barbara. Her father was the local Rector, and after obtaining her Froebel certificate she was very lucky to get this plum of a post.

"Why can't there be gymkhanas in winter?" asked Susan, thickly buttering a scone.

"There's hunting in winter," suggested Gerald.

"Well, that doesn't help us. We're not old enough."

"Next year," said Eileen. "I shall be able to go in for the jumping-class, under-tens."

Eileen had just lost her front teeth, and displayed the distressing gap common to six-year-olds.

"Don't Eileen's teeth look awful?" said Caroline, in an interested voice.

"Yours looked just as bad a year ago," Barbara pointed out.

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"Eileen darling, don't grin quite so widely; it does look rather shocking."

"I think Eileen will have very nice teeth," said Miss Lockhart.

"Have I got nice teeth?" demanded Susan and Caroline in one breath.

"You would have, if you brushed them after every meal like I've told you," put in Nanny, seizing the opportunity.

"All horses have nice teeth," said Roger.

"They do not," said Gerald.

"Darling, don't argue," said Barbara. She began to tell Joanna about the way the boys grew out of their school clothes and had to have everybody else's coupons.

"I've got a marvellous idea for when Daddy comes back," said Susan.

"Oh, what?" shrieked Caroline and Eileen.

"I'm going to ask him if we can have proper jumps made in the little paddock."

"Proper jumps with brushwood, and water and everything?"

"He won't," said Gerald. "You're not old enough. Who knocked the bar down three times in the under-twelves?"

"Don't be provocative, Gerald," said Barbara, and began to tell Joanna about Caroline's sinuses.

Susan, who was inclined to be rather righteous, accused Eileen of being greedy and told Caroline to hold her knife properly.

"If it's wet to-morrow I shall curse," said Roger. "The ponies' feet get bogged on Strawberry Moor when it rains."

"Not if you keep on the road," said Susan.

"Who wants to keep on the road?"

"I shall jump two foot six at my next lesson," said Eileen.

"Don't be silly, darling," said Barbara, and began to tell Joanna about Susan having quite good taste in music.

"She played that Beethoven *andante* movement quite beautifully this morning, Lady Barbara," said Miss Lockhart.

"It'll spoil her hands," said Gerald. "That's the first thing in riding, good hands."

"Don't be idiotic," said Caroline, "you might as well say it'll spoil her seat."

"Well, it might."

"There are other things in the world as well as riding, Mr. Gerald," said Nanny.

"What things?" asked Roger, with withering scorn.

They left the table, and the nursery-maid came in and cleared the tea things, drew the curtains, and made up the fire.

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"We usually play a card game after tea, Jon," said Barbara; "can you bear it?"

"I'll do my best," said Joanna obligingly.

They sat round the table again, and began to play a game of their own invention called *So Twisty*, a mixture of whist and *Happy Families*. At half-past seven the children went to their rooms, and had milk and sandwiches in bed. Gerald and Roger, as befitted their superior age and schoolboy status, were allowed to read in bed until eight-thirty.

Barbara and Joanna had dinner in a small room called the study, and after dinner they sat and listened to the radio while Barbara knitted grey socks for the boys.

"I hope you won't find us too frightfully dull," she said apologetically. "This is all we ever seem to do in the evenings. Actually we get so tired with fresh air and riding in the daytime that if we do go out to dinner or have people in we do nothing but yawn. Most of our friends are like ourselves, even if that does sound rather bucolic and demoralised. I never did have any use for society. After I was presented, Mother with a patience which was a credit to her, dragged me through two fruitless seasons. When we went to a ball I used to dive into a corner with one or two people that I liked, and talk about horses and dogs the whole evening. So she gave me up and left me in the country in peace. Can you guess where I met Andy? In a thorn-hedge in the middle of the first run of the season! He was furious at being thrown—the local stables had mounted him on a nasty-tempered hack which nobody else would take out—but we got friendly, and he told me that if ever I would visit his part of the country he would show me real horses. We were married the following Easter."

"I feel frightful," said Joanna. "You know I don't ride. I'm going to spoil your week for you."

"Oh no, you're not," said Barbara. "You're going to ride. You'll pick it up in no time. You're going out with me before breakfast to-morrow. Can't let yourself down in front of the children, you know."

"That was what was worrying me. They seem so keen."

"Yes. They can't bear people who don't ride."

Joanna reflected that Barbara's children were apparently going through life unable to tolerate the vast majority of people.

"I don't want them to think I'm mentally deficient," she said.

"Oh, they wouldn't do that," laughed Barbara, not too reassuringly.

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The trial ride took place in the very cold and uninviting dawn of the next morning. With a proficiency born of desperation, and mounted on a quiet mare, Joanna found it possible to keep her hands down, her knees up, and her back straight.

"You needn't ride to-day," advised Barbara. "We'll think up some excuse, and you'll feel quite at home to-morrow. Those jodhs of mine look well on you; the children won't know they're not your own."

In two days Joanna rode sedately, and the children took it that that was her normal style, and ceased to suggest a gallop.

"She's a widow," Susan was overheard to say, "and widows aren't even allowed to trot."

Pitying looks from the other children bore out their acceptance of this interesting theory.

On Sunday morning Barbara, Joanna, Gerald, and Caroline went to church. Roger had a cold, Susan was keeping him company and Eileen's teeth looked too awful.

Barbara appeared in her timeless Donegal tweed coat and skirt and a green felt pull-on hat. Proudfoot had turned Joanna out in a black wool two-piece heavily trimmed with Persian lamb and a high Cossack hat of the same fur.

She thought, one of us must look all wrong!

Caroline walked between them in a tailored covert coat which had previously belonged to Susan, and which, judging by the way it strained across Caroline's chest and missed her wrists by inches, would shortly belong to Eileen.

Howanroyd Church appeared to be very like the one at Darchingham. The Woodmyre pew was like a small room, fitted with cushioned seats, a square table, coat hooks, and fat red hassocks. From where Joanna sat she could observe two marble wall-memorials and a rather violently hued stained-glass window, all commemorating dead and gone Woodmyres.

Following her gaze, Barbara whispered that the new pulpit had been erected in memory of Andy's grandfather.

When they came out of church everybody was very deferential in clearing a path for them. A number of people lined the way down to the lych-gate, and the Rector came out to be presented to Lady Luscay. Barbara bowed and smiled graciously to many acquaintances, and said, "Don't stare at people, Caroline. Surely you can be looked at without taking any notice."

They walked back through the private woods, and Gerald said, "During the sermon I dreamt I was riding a glorious black stallion

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of seventeen hands. It was trying to throw me, but in my dream it couldn't. It was a marvellous sensation."

"In the sermon," said Caroline, "I was pretending that all those hassocks were ponies. There were two greys, two chestnuts, a black, and a piebald, and they were called——"

"Oh, for goodness sake!" said Gerald. "We don't want to know what they were called."

"Next pony I have," said Caroline, "I'm going to call it Hassock."

"You couldn't call it anything much sillier," said Gerald.

Barbara began to talk about Susan's and Caroline's hair, and how it had been such a nice colour a year or two ago but now it was going terribly faded and mousey. Eileen's on the other hand was improving very much and settling down to a gratifying auburn.

On Sunday evening someone rang up from the boys' school to say that one of the boys had started diphtheria on arriving at home for the half-term holiday, so that the school would have to be considered in quarantine and would not reassemble until further notice. Barbara was quite as pleased as Gerald and Roger.

The days went gently by with schoolroom meals, riding, tennis on the hard court, So Twisty, and knitting. Barbara disliked the drawing-room and the large dining-room, so all meals were taken either in the schoolroom or the morning-room, and in the evenings she and Joanna sat in the study.

Barbara's satisfaction with her life and her children, thought Joanna, was formidable. Her world consisted of the nursery, the schoolroom, the paddock, and the stable, and her attitude showed that beyond these things there was nothing on earth she considered worth noticing. She opened the door a little way and drew you into her warm, childish world; she was supremely kind, but she wanted you to be twelve years old along with her. She was a simple-minded girl with unbelievably limited ideas. With her wiry fair hair, bright eyes, questing nose, and innocently alert expression she looked very like a nice fox-terrier.

Andy was known to be one of those husbands who are always "away from home." Barbara accepted this happily; it didn't worry her. When he came home for a rest, a bit of riding on his own land, and a change of clothes, she was always glad to see him, but on the whole she was so wrapped up in the children that one had the feeling there was no real place in the Keckwith Hall *ménage* for a husband in any case. Barbara had always lived in a world where there was plenty of money, plenty of responsible servants, and plenty of uncomplicated pleasure. Within these boundaries

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she had simple tastes ; she spent her life enjoying herself in her own way and was sincerely anxious for all her family, relatives, and friends to enjoy themselves too. She had only once in her life come up against reality, when her beloved only brother, Hubert, lost his life in the war ; she had taken that grief like a child would take it, and not without pride either. So many young men of their world had also died ; it was part of the traditional *noblesse oblige*. At bottom Barbara was staunchly conventional, a stickler for the done thing, and with no ideas whatever about democracy or social levelling. Free and friendly as she might always be to servants and tenants, this was due to her training and tradition ; it never occurred to her that her world and theirs were one.

Fond as she could not help being of Barbara, it was for the foregoing reasons that Joanna knew there could never be any real intimacy between them. She would go on being irritated with Barbara, wishing she would grow up or come alive like a real person or break out of her narrow little life in some way. She found herself wishing that this week would be over, and then asked herself why ? To what would she be returning after this visit ended ? To a wider freedom ? . . . No. . . . To a better life ? No. . . . Even to a more pleasant life ? . . . No.

She came to the reluctant conclusion that it was her own nature which prevented her from being in such sweet accord with Barbara that she would have been wishful to prolong her visit indefinitely ; and being in a morbid frame of mind she began to blame herself for the incompatibility.

It's my beastly complex nature, thought Joanna ; if I were a simple, sweet kind of person, used to the right background and the right tradition I should think myself in heaven, in this atmosphere of horses, hair-ribbons, and schoolroom tea.

I don't belong, I don't mix, I never shall mix, she told herself unhappily ; and whereas before she had longed for freedom, she now perversely found herself trying as hard as ever she had tried in the early days of her marriage to make herself one with the Luscaj tradition. She threw herself into Barbara's chosen pursuits, she agreed with everything that Barbara said, she gazed as admiringly at Barbara as did the adoring governess, Miss Lockhart, she played with abandon at nursery card games, she enthused over the horses and copied the family small talk.

She still remained herself ; at night, alone in her room, she was still conscious of the conflict within. She wondered whether she had not felt worse since the chance conversation with the man called Bagpipes at the roadside hotel, the first real person she

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had spoken to since the days of her "other" life before she had met and married Hubert. Dark, ugly, intelligent, and of the people, she recalled him vividly, while reminding herself that she had left behind the right to choose for herself such friends or even acquaintances.

VII

"Do you see much of Isabel?" Barbara asked as they walked in the woods one smoky-hued November afternoon.

"Oh, yes. She floats in quite frequently in an afternoon. The mile walk from the Castle and back across the park gives her what she calls that 'outdoor' feeling."

"And Simon?"

"We don't see him often. He's very busy, taking his position seriously."

Barbara sighed, and after a moment said, "What are Isabel's plans? Do you think she'll live at Darchingham altogether?"

"Oh, no," said Joanna. "She's going to open up Carlton House Terrace, and have a riotous season there next year, with balls and dinners, and everything as it was in the great old days. She's looking forward to it; and the way she tells it, it really does sound as if she'd have fun out of it."

Barbara slipped her arm through Joanna's.

"I believe you'd have loved that kind of thing, Jon, and oh! you would have made the most beautiful hostess. I can picture you receiving at the head of the staircase as Mother used to do, and simply loving the dancing and the crushes and what Andy calls the 'season racket.' And now you can't have any of that; I do understand, darling. It's so sad that everything is finished for you while you're quite young, and I think it's wonderful how you accept that for Hubert's sake. I hope you're a little bit happy with us here? We've tried to make you so."

Joanna, feeling guilty and unappreciative, pressed Barbara's arm in return, and said, "You've been angelic to me. Thank you for everything."

"The children have fallen for you completely," said Barbara. "Susan, whose sole ambition for years has been to run a racing stable when she grows up, now says that she would like to look as elegant as Aunt Joanna and wear the same kind of clothes; and when I reminded her that they wouldn't look right in a racing stable, I could see from her face that the previous dream was rocking!"

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"I'm afraid it will take more than my example to rock Susan's ideas to any extent," said Joanna. "She took me into her room yesterday, and she's got cut-out pictures of horses from the *Field* and *Country Life* stuck all over the walls—hundreds of them."

Barbara hesitated a moment, and said, "She got the idea from Hubert's old room—the one he had when he was a schoolboy—at Darchingham. Jon, would you like to see some snapshots of Hubert when he was a boy? I didn't like to ask you before. Would it be very trying for you?"

"I'd like to see them," Joanna replied, curiously aware that she was trying to please Barbara rather than herself.

Barbara's snapshots, rather faded and stuck haphazard in an album, proved to have no power to give her either pleasure or pain. A schoolboy in flannel trousers and blazer, with indeterminate or blurred features, did not suggest Hubert to her, Hubert, aged fifteen, surrounded by dogs; Barbara and Hubert together with the dogs; Hubert again, a few years older, with different dogs; Hubert mounted; Hubert in hunting kit; Hubert in tennis white with an armful of rackets in the Wimbledon manner.

"And look at these," said Barbara, rather diffidently, showing still more faded prints of Hubert in his pram, and Hubert on his first tricycle, and Hubert and Barbara beside their mother in an old-fashioned type of car, two frilly toddlers and a lace-clad mother with a feathered hat.

Joanna picked up a large picture printed on glossy paper and obviously cut from one of the "better" illustrated weeklies. Two small children in velvet sat side by side on a marble table examining a picture-book. The caption underneath, with its strange names, conveyed nothing to Joanna; so unfamiliar was it that at first she did not recognise the children as Hubert and his sister.

"Viscount Lormain"—who could that be?—and "Lady Barbara Boldminer"—oh!—"children of the Earl and Countess of Lusca." "

"Don't we look awful?" said Barbara fondly. "Hubert hated that velvet outfit; he said it made him look like Curly Cedric in *Little Lord Fauntleroy*." She laid the picture back in the album and added, "It gives me quite a shock to notice how like Hubert Susan is in so many ways. She says the same kind of things that he used to say. The other day she said, 'Mummy, wouldn't it be marvellous if there were no people in the world, only children and horses?' It took me right back to a day I remember so well, when Hubert and I were hacking back from a Pony Show, tired out and happy. He would be about eleven.

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He said to me, 'If I could have a wish it would be to stay like I am now—and you, Baba, and all the other children, and have no grown-ups in the world at all, only hundreds and hundreds of horses.'

"It seems queer to me," said Joanna. "Hubert never talked to me about horses."

"What did Hubert talk about?" Barbara asked with almost pathetic eagerness.

What *had* Hubert talked about? Flying . . . and food . . . and "the French." Hubert had always had a lot to say about "the French," in a kind of half-amused, half-irritated way. If Hubert had lived, in forty years time he would have been seated in a Club arm-chair talking about, "those damn foreigners, my dear sir, never could understand them. Had no use for them. The French . . . pah!"

The first time she had taken Hubert to the flat when they arrived in Paris, he had said afterwards, "What on earth were all those Frenchmen doing at your mother's place?"

"All those Frenchmen," Joanna pointed out, "are exactly three in number, and they are very old friends of Mummy's. M. Paul Chaminade is her bank manager; M. Loger was her accompanist for twenty years; and M. Voisette-Colbert is a neighbour who lives all alone and gets into the way of dropping in on Mummy for a little gay conversation. Mummy is the sort of person who can't live without company."

"I thought," said Hubert, very British, "that they might have buzzed off when we arrived. After all, you were bringing your fiancé home for the first time, to meet your mother. I should have thought that was a sufficiently private occasion."

"In my circle, just the opposite!" Joanna declared cheerfully. "Definitely an occasion for old friends to gather round and make an excuse for a party."

"An old French custom, I suppose," said Hubert. "This is what I pay for getting engaged to you, you adorable mongrel. 'Mossoors' with carnations on their lapels and the wrong sort of shoes, bowing nearly double at me. I thought one old boy was going to kiss me."

"I'm surprised he didn't, if you mean Phillippe Loger. He kisses nearly everybody. You must have given him a horribly dirty look to stave him off, you ice-bound Briton. He kissed me; they all did."

"You're telling me!" said Hubert grimly.

"They've known me all my life, and they're French, and I'm

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half-French," said Joanna defiantly. "To change the subject you enjoyed the champagne, didn't you?"

"Super!" Hubert admitted. "My eyes nearly popped out when your mother produced it. Where on earth did it come from?"

"Oh, she'd been saving it for an occasion. Mummy's never at a loss, you'll find that out."

"But all those Frenchmen——" said Hubert, coming back to his original grievance. "She asked them to stay for supper, too."

"Of course. She always does. That's part of our Paris life. During the occupation we always used to eat together, sharing anything we'd got. Didn't you ever read that story of O. Henry's about the three poor people in the New York apartment house? One had a potato, one had an onion, and one had a bit of meat. And they put them all together and made a lovely stew."

Hubert looked as though he thought occupation habits had gone on quite long enough and should now be buried.

But anxious not to appear churlish he said at once, "Well, I think it's a lovely flat, and your mother is most charming, though a bit volatile."

"You forget," said Joanna, "that she is French."

"Forget it?" said Hubert, with an indulgent laugh. "On my life, no! I couldn't forget that."

"She liked you," said Joanna.

"Did she?" said Hubert amazed. "Good lord!"

Joanna and her mother had gone into the little kitchenette to make omelettes for supper from the eggs which Joanna and Hubert had brought from Quimper.

"Well?" said Joanna expectantly.

Anny Bisset whirled her daughter into an embrace.

"My darleeng! How attractive he is . . . so handsome . . . so *gentil*. And perhaps he is of good family, too?"

"Listen, Mummy," said Joanna. "I must tell you that Hubert is not Monsieur Hubert, as you called him just now to M. Loger and the others. He is Lord Lusca, Mummy. He is an earl."

"Lord Lusca?" said Mummy calmly. "Then you will be Lady Lusca. How nize."

"Mummy! Does that give you no surprise?"

Mummy went on neatly breaking eggs.

"For the daughter of Anny Bisset to marry an English earl, that gives me no surprise," she said. "That is quite to be expected."

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"I love him, Mummy," said Joanna. "I'm marrying for love after all."

"That makes everything even nizer still," said Mummy with great satisfaction.

Hubert said that the idea of marriage by a French civil ceremony left him cold, and that his mother would be sure to ask in what church they had been married; so they found an English church and were married by an R.A.F. padre. Mummy looked marvellous at the wedding, far outshining the bride in a violet and scarlet Lanvin outfit and all her diamonds, and everybody exclaimed, "Look! There's Madame Anny Bisset!" A crowd outside the church had gazed and gazed at Mummy while Hubert and Joanna got away almost unnoticed. There were plenty of Frenchmen at the wedding, and any amount of kissing afterwards, which Hubert stood with admirable tolerance.

Apart from talking about "the French," after they were married and when they were not actually making love, Hubert had talked R.A.F. talk and Joanna had listened intelligently, understanding nothing; and they had both talked about food and sought it diligently.

But Hubert had never talked about horses.

The next morning when Joanna left, the children were all in a group on the steps as they had been on her arrival.

They were quite sorry to see her go. Gerald presented her with a china ink-stand in the shape of a horse's head which had been subscribed for by all the children and bought in the village by Miss Lockhart.

"We'll come and stay with you some hols.," said Roger.

Caroline and Eileen hung on her arms, speechless for once.

"I'll write to you and tell you what the new foal turns out to be when it's born," said Susan.

"Good-bye, Jon, darling," said Barbara, kissing her warmly. "We've loved having you. You must come again in the summer."

How kind she is, thought Joanna, returning Barbara's kiss with a rush of gratitude.

Then she stepped into the car alone, and Proudfoot—who had had a grand time at Keckwith Hall—got up beside Edwards, and they were off.

Joanna had luncheon that day in a private room at a hotel called *The County Arms*. The arrangements had been made by Proudfoot on the telephone, and nothing went wrong with them. Nor was there anybody to talk to.

VIII

"And did you enjoy your visit?"

"Very much, thank you."

"What was that about a visit?"

"Joanna has just come back from a visit to Barbara at Keckwith Hall."

"Oh. Did you enjoy your visit?"

"Very much, thank you."

"Who did you say had been on a visit?"

"Joanna has been on a visit. To the Woodmyres at Keckwith Hall."

"Oh. Did she enjoy herself? Get any riding?"

"She says she enjoyed her visit very much."

"Where did you say she has been on a visit?"

"To Barbara's place. Keckwith Hall."

"Oh, how lovely. Did you have an enjoyable time, Joanna?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Another cup of tea, madam?"

"No, thank you."

"Another cup of tea, sir?"

"If you please."

"Another cup of tea, my lady?"

"No, thank you."

"Another cup of tea, my lord?"

"What's that? Yes, please."

"I think it's time we were going. Good-bye, Isabel."

"Good-bye, Isabel dear."

"Good-bye, dear Lady Lusca."

"Good-bye, dear Isabel. I'm sure it has been just like old times."

"Good-bye, Lady Lusca. So pleasant to be at dear Darchingham again."

"Good-bye. . . . Good-bye. . . . Good-bye. . . ."

said Isabel with her practised smile.

At last they were all gone. A footman lifted the immense tray packed with Georgian silver, the famous tea-service which had been bought for Queen Alexandra's visit; another removed countless little tables and punched out flattened cushions. The drawing-room began to look formal and comfortless.

"Why is it," said Isabel, "that all the worst bores in the county come to tea on Sunday afternoons?"

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"Probably another old family tradition," said Joanna.

Isabel looked at her sharply. It was all very well to laugh at county bores, but to take that light cynical tone about family traditions was going a little too far.

"You needn't leave yet," she said. "Let's go in the library; it's more peaceful."

In the library a huge fire was burning, lighting up the deep red-leather chairs, cushioned and inviting, and the pile of sleeping dogs in the middle of the bearskin rug.

"These brutes take all the heat," said Isabel. "We sit and shiver on the verge while they bask in the warmth of our fire. Never mind them, Joanna; walk right over them if you want to warm your feet."

But she did not disturb the dogs.

"And now to ask an entirely original question," went on Isabel, "how *did* you enjoy yourself at Barbara's place?"

"Barbara was very kind. She worked hard for me."

"Oh. Lots of fruitless energy, I imagine."

"If it was fruitless, that was probably my fault."

Isabel thought for a few moments, and then said—as though administering a gentle warning—"Well, you'll probably have to go there on lots and lots of visits. She's your sister-in-law. You might as well conform."

"I liked the children. They're quite nice children, if they weren't such monomaniacs about horses."

Isabel shrugged her shoulders.

"In our life——"

"Yes?"

"Nothing. You'll find out. Do you miss Paris?"

"No . . . no, I can't say that I do."

"All right, all right. I was only trying to be understanding. I've always been like that, trying to put myself in the other person's place; it's a bit wearing, giving yourself out. When you've warmed your feet you can tell me some books and authors. They keep sending me boxes from the library and, quite honestly, I never have the patience to read more than the first chapter. I envy you, having *time* to read; I mean, to choose."

"You might not like what I like," said Joanna, "and I could do with having less time to read."

"Could you?" said Isabel thoughtfully. "That's rather a pity. Now take my life . . . you wouldn't believe how boring it can be. To-morrow morning I've got nine women—nine!—coming here from the village to tell me about the Women's

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Institute. I offered to go down there and see *them*, but they seemed to *want* to come here. I can't think why. And nine! They've made a most absurd difficulty for themselves; they can't ask me to be President because that doubtful honour is already borne by your worthy mother-in-law, and it would be *infra dig.* to ask me to accept a Vice . . . I mean it's all so *small*, isn't it? I just wanted to show you the sort of thing . . ." She stopped abruptly, feeling the ground become delicate. After all, Joanna herself had so nearly missed. . . .

"Well, there you are!" said Isabel. "I mean, it shows you. I'm driving down to the village on Tuesday morning with the children. I'll call and pick you up."

Isabel liked driving to the village. She had a smart little yellow trap and a well-bred, satin-skinned bay pony, and since she drove rather inexpertly a groom went too, ostensibly to hold the pony outside the shops but actually to smooth Isabel's way for other road-users. Joanna smiled her inward smile as she thought of the way that she and Isabel and the children would walk through the village; a kind of royal progress, with the shopkeepers coming to their doors, bowing and avid for the distinguished custom, and all the local housewives industriously timing themselves to dart out of doorways just at the right moment to win a nod and a good morning from the great ladies . . . to talk of it afterwards . . . "I had a nice little chat with the countess this morning."

It was fun to begin with, and now it wasn't fun any longer. Obviously the fault lay in Joanna; Isabel, not she, must have the right instincts.

Later that evening Isabel said to her husband, as she had said before, "I simply cannot understand Joanna. I tell you, I cannot. I've done everything. She reacts in the wrong way. She's an enigma, that's what she is—an enigma."

"Of course," said Simon, "she's half French."

"Why do you say 'half French' and then lift your eyebrows?"

"I did not lift my eyebrows."

"Don't lie to me, Simon. You had eyebrows all over your face."

"Well . . . French people think differently about things."

"About what things?"

"Oh, for God's sake, Isabel! You never heard Anny Bisset sing; you don't know anything about Joanna's mother. I do. I lived on the Continent for ten years, from sixteen to twenty-six,

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an impressionable age. Anny Bisset was a public idol ; everybody talked about her. She was a radiant sort of person and terribly generous. She gave and gave in all directions. She was one of those people to whom the important thing in life is to see that everybody around her gets what they want, whether it is good for them or not."

"But that's a-moral."

"Quite. But rather sweet in a rich, adored, flattered person like Anny Bisset. I suppose she was a bit of a yes-woman—in fact a never-say-no woman—but she was loved. That's something, isn't it?"

"Loved!" said Isabel. "And a concert artist. And she never said no. How well I understand the type."

"Yes," said Simon, thoughtfully. "I was afraid you would. And don't worry me any more about Joanna. You women!"

IX

A house, like a human being, has personality and temperament, but it can only reflect, it cannot create its atmosphere.

Darchingham Dower House, for two hundred years the shrine of widowhood, a kind of casket for relegated countesses, was steeped in a sad dignity which defied hope and cheer. Everything in it was old, but old age was not its bane. None of its successive owners had been very old. Joanna, tracing family records, had discovered that the last five countesses had all been widowed before they were sixty and dead before they were seventy. She had thought with dismay, supposing Lady Lusca were to die? This place would be *my* home, to remain here in proud decay until I too should be carried out to the family tomb! After that, the house became oppressive as well as gloomy.

As Christmas approached Lady Lusca grew more silent and withdrawn.

"She dreads it," said Esther fussily, arranging white winter orchids from the Darchingham conservatories. "The first Christmas without Hubert."

"Hubert wasn't at home last Christmas," said Joanna, rather thoughtlessly.

Esther gave her a reproachful look.

"Last Christmas she still had a son. Dear Lady Lusca . . . we must all try to be very thoughtful for her sake."

What about my sake? thought Joanna.

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It rained every day; the woods and fields were dark and sodden. There was nothing to go out for; a few old friends called.

Isabel was beginning to entertain at the Park. She had given two dinners for neighbours and local friends, and a house-party week-end adorned by the presence of more illustrious guests. There was even what Isabel described as *A Very Small Dance*, at which a youthful Royalty was present; and Simon had invited the Hunt to the first breakfast of the season, where five Press photographers attended.

Invitations arrived as a matter of course at the Dower House, and Esther—making it all sound so trivial—answered them over the telephone to Isabel in her own sitting-room. . . . “The ladies thank you very much, but of course you’ll understand. . . .”

Isabel herself arrived one afternoon during tea.

“I’ve got an idea,” she said, dropping her furs and pointedly choosing a chair well away from the fire, while her lifted eyebrows said plainly, “How you can sit in this stifling hole——!”

“I’ve got an idea that I’d like to revive the old Darchingham Christmas. After all, the war is over; we’re entitled to a little jollity, though heaven knows the earth is more scorched than ever as regards shopping. But Darchingham was always noted for its Christmases, and—well, why shouldn’t we?”

She glanced at Lady Luscy, who sat, austere and serene, knitting white jackets for orphan babies.

“You know all about it,” said Isabel. “I’d need your co-operation and a lot of help in the details.”

“Not this year, my dear Isabel.”

Isabel looked annoyed.

“I had hoped you wouldn’t feel that way about it,” she said.

“I could not help feeling that way about it. I dislike the whole idea very much.”

Isabel managed to control her feelings while still making them obvious in the way she snapped her cigarette case and flicked on her lighter.

“After all, Christmas is Christmas.”

“My dear Isabel, you can have any kind of Christmas you like at Darchingham. But please don’t associate me with it. In any case . . . ten months . . . it seems a little——”

“I hoped you wouldn’t feel like that either. You know we mean no disrespect; but life goes on. We’re not selfish, Simon and I. In the matter of Christmas festivities, we’re not actually

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thinking of ourselves. There are tenants and friends and neighbours."

"Whom, Isabel, I venture to suggest I know better than you do. They will not expect anything this year."

"You think we should cut it out altogether?"

Lady Lusca y said smoothly, not lifting her eyes from her work, "There's nothing wrong with a family party. . But the old Darchingham Christmas was like a royal progress; the balls—I couldn't tell you the number of people we would entertain. And for three days I'm sure we never sat down less than fifty at a meal. The Christmas dinner procession . . . and the gold tree . . . and the midnight masque . . . and the torchlight ride round the park. But why am I talking about it? It's yours for the future, Isabel, but please, not when I'm here to see."

"Now you're offended with me. I can't make you realise that I meant it all in a large open-handed sort of way—not to glorify myself."

"I don't doubt your sincerity."

"What are you going to do at Christmas? And Joanna?"

"We shall keep Christmas—with our memories," said Lady Lusca y with superb dignity.

Joanna followed Isabel out.

"It's hard luck on you," said Isabel, "but I do see her point. I shall be glad for your sake when you go to town; there's more to see, if not more to do. Did you think I was being callous—about Hubert's memory, I mean?"

"Of course not, Isabel. I know you too well. Besides——"

"Besides, what?"

"Oh, nothing." She had almost said, "Besides, why should we all die with Hubert?" (How shocking . . . how out of character.) . . .

Esther appeared each evening with lists of servants, present and superannuated, for whom gifts of money must be arranged. Amounts given last year were compared; new notes and silver from the Bank sorted into appropriate piles. Business-like, Lady Lusca y nodded and ticked with her red pencil. Christmas became a paying-out prospect.

Joanna could not help thinking of Mummy and her Christmases at the flat, carnival-like, with many silly small surprises. One Christmas Eve after they had come home from Midnight Mass at Notre-Dame, Jon couldn't get to sleep, and rummaging she had discovered in a drawer a roll of red and silver ribbon. So she crept into the sitting-room and tied little red-and-silver bows on

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everything, and even pinned them on the tangerines, and went back to bed. Next morning Mummy nearly collapsed with laughing; it all looked so funny and gay.

Another Christmas morning she had wakened to the sound of singing, and when the bedroom door opened, in marched four children chanting an old Breton carol. The first carried a cup and saucer, the second a plate with a croisette upon it, the third a cream jug, the fourth a sugar basin, and finally—carolling like a lark—came Mummy, wearing a superb gown and bearing a tray with the tea-pot. The performers had enjoyed their own singing so much that they kept on marching round the room until the tea was cold, and Joanna left them singing and went into the kitchenette to make more tea. After that they all exchanged funny little home-made presents. . . .

This year she hadn't even been able to send a present to America as Madame Anny Bisset was still touring and had no settled address. Would Mummy also forget? No. Mummy's present arrived the week before Christmas, a dashing leopard muff and beret to match, mailed from a Chicago store.

"Bless you, Mummy," said Joanna, hiding the glamorous gift in its wrappings and burying it in the back of her clothes cupboard.

On her dressing-table stood a full-length portrait of Hubert, in a silver frame. The duplicate stood in the same position in his mother's room; the old Countess would stand before it for a long time each morning, silent, as though in prayer. The silence grew deeper as the festival day, wearing its shroud, came nearer.

"You don't look dead," said Joanna, addressing her picture, wondering why she felt no inclination to mourn or pray. "You look vital and debonair. I bet you looked just like that before you went out. It was quick; you never knew what hit you. I bet you're laughing still—Shiny. Take a look at us now; what do you think of it all? Do I make a good widow—or wouldn't you know?"

Barbara wrote:

"My darling Jon,

"This is just a little line to tell you we are thinking of you at this time. On Christmas Day in the midst of our fun—for the children's sake—we shall stop to remember you. Will that comfort you a little?"

Isabel, picking up the letter, commented, "For the children's sake—that's good. We're having fun for our own sake, think

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what you like of us. But I'll think of you too, Joanna, because you're a better woman than I could ever be. Do you suppose that Hubert would approve of this gloom? I wonder!"

When Joanna came down to breakfast on Christmas morning she found on her plate a small sealed box. Inside it was a beautiful diamond brooch in the shape of a spray of ivy leaves, and a card in Lady Lusca's delicate hand-writing—"To my dear daughter-in-law from Hubert's mother on Christmas Day, 1945."

She went straight upstairs and said, touched in spite of herself, "This is too good of you. Thank you very much indeed, Lady Lusca."

The old lady was obviously pleased, as one whose gift is appreciated.

"Don't thank me, my dear. Think of the gift as coming from Hubert, through me; he would have wished it. Do you like the brooch?"

"It's lovely. Such an unusual design."

"But quite modern. People are wearing them on their lapels."

"It was sweet of you to notice and want me to have one," said Joanna. "I feel ashamed . . . I haven't got a present for you. I thought—you wouldn't—"

"I didn't expect or want it," said her mother-in-law. "I particularly didn't wish this day to become an exchange of presents; that would be too much like the old times. Put your brooch away now; it comes to you with my love, and his."

"Thank you."

When she went downstairs to the sitting-room she thought the servants looked at her strangely; pityingly, because she was having no Christmas, admiringly because of her martyrdom and devotion. She sat before the fire with clenched hands, feeling the nails bite against her palms, lost in self-pity.

Self-pity—and they thought she was mourning for Hubert. What a hypocrite she was! You've got something to laugh at now, Shiny, she told him, thinking of his debonair picture.

Lady Lusca came down to find her sitting there, brooding over the fire.

She slipped a book into the hands lying loosely on the girl's knee.

"My dear, you should read Browning. He has an answer for all your questions."

"Such as, why my life should end at twenty-eight?"

"Don't. Cynicism is beneath you. I have asked many

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questions in my life-time, some of them bitter ones, and he has never failed me yet—my heroic poet.”

Joanna took the book and opened it carelessly. It opened at the poem, *Abt Vogler*. She read :

“What is our failure here but a triumph’s evidence
For the fullness of days? Have we withered or agonised?
Why else was the pause prolonged but that singing might issue
thence?
Why rushed the discords in but that harmony should be prized?
Sorrow is hard to bear, and doubt is slow to clear,
Each sufferer says his say, his scheme of the weal and woe;
But God has a few of us whom he whispers in the ear,
The rest may reason and welcome; ’tis we musicians know.”

She had an uncomfortable feeling of having been addressed by a ghost. Perhaps there were minds that knew you better than you knew yourself; mystical influences; an Infinite Experience in which you could confide all earthly experiences. The contact in itself was more frightening than comforting to one of Joanna’s temperament.

“Is there anything on that page that you can appreciate?” said her mother-in-law’s gentle, insistent voice.

“A great deal; but I’m half afraid to apply it.”

“Why so? When genius speaks to you directly——”

“I must read more. I hardly know any but the French poets.”

“They are too fatalistic. Browning is courage itself.”

She went on reading, and when she paused for a moment the room where she and Lady Lusca and Esther were sitting was so silent that she could hear the drip of a winter-sodden branch in the garden.

As though suddenly conscious too of that heavy stillness, Lady Lusca looked up.

“How quiet we are! Esther, turn on the radio and find us some really nice music.”

It came, stealing out of that silence in all its bitter-sweet poignancy, bringing all its memories . . . Grieg’s “Elegaic Melody,” a song of Spring sung to grey skies and grey waters while the earth is still sullen, sleeping its winter sleep.

“That was beautiful,” said Lady Lusca when the announcer’s voice broke in. “Does it remind you of something? Your face lighted up, and then you looked as though you were trying to remember.”

“Did I? I often heard it in Paris; it was one of Mummy’s

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favourites, but she didn't sing it; it didn't suit her voice. It was one of Tauber's songs."

Now that the music was over Joanna realised how it had exhausted her emotionally to have to sit through it, with all its bitter recollections of the light-hearted, careless days; the sad, sweet, mounting ecstasy of it had almost been too much for her. Music, once adored, was now a torment.

She slipped away to bed, almost in tears, her self-control severely shaken. Music! Music! Wasn't that almost too awful a punishment, even for her, to have all the joy of music turned to wild pain? It was the bitterest moment of all the bitter winter. Oh, if it were only Spring . . . if only that melody would cease to play itself over and over in her head, until she felt that she could never bear to hear it played again. And if not that, perhaps no other music; perhaps all that heavenly art was left behind in the old world which by her own folly she had destroyed.

Wearily she lay in bed, flat on her back, staring at the window's grey square. How monotonous this sleeplessness of hers had become; how slowly the long, comfortless hours went by. When she could bear it no longer she would get up and pace the room, trying to find something upon which to fix her mind. But there was nothing, that was the worst part of it. In this kind of life, there was no daily problem, no struggle, no decision to be made.

She listened to all those tiny nocturnal sounds of the country's stillness . . . a rustle of bough or of bird . . . the far lonely whistle of a train. At least in the old days there had been something to listen to, something to think about.

Gradually the night deepened, the window's rectangle grew darker, the whole room darker, darker. These were the hours of lowest vitality, when you couldn't help thinking of days when you laid your young head on the pillow and slept like a baby till the sun pushed its long fingers in at the window and woke you. Now you only wondered how long you could control these jangled nerves.

If only it would come light . . . if only it were Spring!

II

I

IT was May in London ; buildings shabby from years of war had now a hopeful gleam, and Spring-enamelled trees were like emerald banners in parks and squares.

A brilliant day dawned, and bold sunlight flashed into the back windows of a tall grey house in a Kensington crescent. The man who welcomed it, dragging to its backward limit the faded red curtain, had been up and dressed for two hours.

It was a day of days for him. A painter, the portrait on which he had been passionately working for weeks was finished. Moreover, this afternoon was to be the first public exhibition of his work at a small gallery. A small exhibition, but to him exciting.

The portrait stood on its easel in the best light possible. No light was adequate to show off a painting in this room. The painter stood before it, almost afraid to look lest he had dreamed too much and morning would reveal some depressing flaw.

But, no. It was good. It was a fine portrait, honest, true in its values, clean, beautiful.

He looked critically at the signature : "Conan Bane." Did it betray a slight nervousness, a lack of confidence ? Impatient idiot, to sign it yesterday in the excitement of achievement instead of waiting for this cooler morning mood.

A wave of diffidence swept over him, the artist's awful revulsion against his own work which is next door to despair. He picked up the holland cover and threw it over the canvas.

The room was large and well proportioned ; shabby, but still remembering a prosperous past. The Victorian furniture was good, if obvious, and there were no knick-knacks. A moss-green carpet ; a bare mahogany table ; two deep easy chairs with comfortably sagging seats ; a crammed, glass-fronted bookcase ; painting paraphernalia strewn about ; an imposing radio-gramophone, the only modern piece in the room ; a green rep curtain screening off a cupboard.

It suited its owner ; it had a personality very like his own, spacious, intolerant of clutter ; reserved, friendly under a cloak of suspicion ; expecting to be despised ; defying criticism—except his own ; generous ; philosophic ; nostalgic.

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A door slammed in the house ; boisterous footsteps broke the silence, stopped outside the painter's door.

"It's Blair," a voice called. "Can I come in?"

"Yes. . . . Watch the draught ; the window's open and I don't want those sheets all over the floor."

A youngish man, gay, sleek-haired, challenging, broke into the room.

"You've finished breakfast ! I thought I was the only one who got up early."

Bane snapped his fingers. "Breakfast ? That was it. . . . I knew there was something I'd forgotten ! . . . I've finished the picture. Brought it from the studio last night because I couldn't be parted from it. There ! . . . Yours is the first view."

Blair Kirby stood in front of the easel and scrutinised the canvas with the air of one who takes nothing for granted.

"Boy, oh, boy, that's good."

"You don't have to say so."

"You know me. If it was trash, I'd have said so. But it's so good it nearly makes me feel reverent about art. Bag, what an achievement ! What a superb feeling it must give you to be the creator of *that*. I've always envied you your talent for 'total' concentration on the job in hand. It's the only way. I swear I'll come back to earth again and live for my work."

"You don't have anything to envy me for."

"I surprise you, do I ? I used to say to people, look at Bane. Work, that's all he lives for. What's his mind but a saturated solution of art ? No, there's more to it than that. Character and purpose. On, on ! To the Pole, to the Pole ! How long have I known you ? Seven years—eight ?"

"About eight."

"And in all that time you've never taken a holiday."

"Nonsense. I've often been away. I have to have horizons."

"But no relaxation."

"That is relaxation."

"Well . . . I must say you get results. For myself, I blame everything on temperament. The easy way out. Now take my job—"

"Blair——" The painter laughed. "I've been taking it drop by drop for years."

"Well, somebody has to write gossip columns. But I've got too many interests ; I know it, but I can't cut any of them out. I can't and I won't. So I achieve nothing."

"I like your work. It's rich and witty."

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"I shan't leave anything behind me."

Bane lifted his eyebrows and grinned.

"Thinking already of posterity?"

"Frankly, do you—ever?"

"Does any artist, in any sphere of art? Didn't they all work for their generation? Keats . . . 'when I have fears that I may cease to be, before my pen has plucked my teeming brain'; that was for his to-day, not ours."

"But our to-day is *the* age. Such appreciation, such tolerance! Even if we can't understand we say, 'He must have a message.' We almost say, If it is obscure it must be good. They used to let the dogs loose. In my moments of doubt I feel that there's something shabby about ephemeral writing."

"I didn't know that you had moments of doubt, Blair?"

"They're very fleeting and rare. But to spend one's life in recording the trivialities of an age . . . and then to look at a real picture——"

"Why do you read Pepys? There are better historians. Because he recorded the trivialities of an age."

"You're kind, Bagpipes. You're *simpatico*. And if you're not hungry you ought to be! Let me ring the bell for your breakfast."

"If you've time to watch me eat. I'm too topped-up to eat alone."

Blair Kirby looked at his watch.

"I'll stay for a quarter of an hour. Actually I'm off to Epsom to find out what Society is saying about the horses this fine Spring weather."

Bane pressed the bell beside the fireplace.

"For a chap who writes one star-spangled column of society gossip a day, you do get about."

"One a day? Good lord, if I had to write more I'd go insane. You try being richly witty to order, you glum brute."

"Nine-tenths of my work—creative work—*is* done to order."

Blair nodded. "At bottom I believe in the hard way."

"So do I. One needs stimulation, challenge. Not dope. Do I hear footsteps?"

"The beautiful Olga. Man, if that girl and her little sister would wash themselves and comb their tresses once in a while they'd be the talk of London. And if they'd lived in Dante Gabriel's day they'd have been immortalised by now, hung up all over the Tate. They're his type to an eye-lash—dirty Blessed Damozels. I wonder where they got their looks?"

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"Not from Mrs. H."

"Must have been from their late lamented Dad. I smell the coffee."

"Good morning, Mr. Bane," said the exquisite girl who entered, in raucous Cockney accents. "Here's your breakfast. Thought you wasn't never going to ring."

"Thanks, Olga. Could you reach another cup out of the cupboard for Mr. Kirby?"

The red-gold hair was tousled; the blue dress shrieked for the wash-tub; a blatant hole adorned the heel of each stocking; the shoes hadn't seen blacking for weeks.

She raised a cheerful, smeared face from which blazed two magnificent dark eyes.

"Here you are, Mr. Bane. Me Mum says, will you come down and see our Moya before you go out? She's wrote a poem about your exhibition and she wants it to bring you luck."

"Thanks, Olga. I'll come down in ten minutes."

"How can you bother with that brat!" said Blair Kirby as the door closed.

"But a nice little brat. You miss something, having no contact with brats. Innocence, and no ulterior motives."

Blair laughed and buttered a slice of toast.

"People talk about the colour bar; well, there's only one colour bar I'll admit, and it's the difference between Olga's face and a clean one. They talk about class barriers; when you get down to it, it's a soap barrier. The washed and the unwashed. And talking of class . . ."

He wandered round the room, and came to anchor opposite the portrait.

"There, Bagpipes, you have the criterion. Look at that black dress—chiffon. The velvet at the throat. The pearls. Those pearls, I'd say, would come off the canvas into my hands."

"The face is what matters."

"Don't I know it! Man, do you realise that you've got the light shining *out* of those eyes? A superb effect. And the face, that gleam—that radiance—is not on the surface but in the flesh."

The painter looked on with furrowed forehead, raking a hand through his hair.

"It's a trick; a fluke. It worries me, because I don't know how it came and I shall never be able to do it again."

"Oh, blessed fluke! And the texture of the skin—like porcelain, and with the living coolness of skin, I'll bet. She's a damn good-looking old girl, anyway. Constance, Countess of Lusca.

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A type, the *grande dame* of England, like my sainted grandmother who left me the pittance which protects me from the ultimate consequences of my own inefficiency. Gone—gone for ever! How did you get this very exclusive commission, may I ask? The whole Royal Academy could have gone on its knees in vain.”

“It isn’t a long story.” The painter leaned back against the table, stirring his cup of coffee. “I knew a chap called Simon Boldminer; keen on pictures. Had money. A good fellow, too. By an unexpected death he came into the Lusca title. The old lady is the widow of one of his predecessors, and he got the idea he’d like to make her a present of her portrait. And miraculously and very generously, he remembered that he’d liked my work and he gave the commission to me.”

“Terrific luck, wasn’t it?”

“First paid-for portrait commission I’ve ever had.”

“Well, you’ve done them proud. Are you showing this in the exhibition?”

“Wish I was.”

“Why not?”

“For one thing, it would mean the lady’s consent, and I wouldn’t call that probable. She isn’t the kind of person who would willingly agree to having her face on show for the general public to stare at. What’s more, I would never dare to ask her.”

“Pity, when it’s the best thing you’ve ever done.”

“No use worrying. I’ll get by.”

“The critics would have liked this.”

“My dear Blair, don’t be naïve. Do you ever read criticism in these days? The pictures, the plays, the books, the poems, the films. It’s all so screamingly funny that you wonder if you’ve got into the fourth form dormitory by mistake. A country that makes Epstein’s Adam into a shilling seaside peepshow hasn’t any right to talk about criticism.”

“The critics can still make or destroy you.”

“I question that. In the British public one can at last discern just the glimmerings of an independent judgment.”

“Not a very reliable one, I should think.”

“I said glimmerings. The other night I went to a new play. Everybody enjoyed it and praised it. Next morning the crits. were bad. That night at the club those who had praised were saying, ‘Well, I didn’t really think it was good. It was pretty awful, actually.’ God, that makes me sick.”

“So it would seem. You’re eating nothing.”

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"Can't. Too much on my mind. I'm taking the portrait home this morning."

"Where to?"

"The old lady's house in Henriques Place."

"Is that where you painted her?"

"No. She came to the studio in Baker Street for the sittings."

"A bit sticky, no doubt. Strictly business?"

"She wasn't exactly chatty. As a matter of fact she used to bring her companion with her, a funny little elderly dame who read aloud out of 'John Halifax, Gentleman' during the sittings."

"Marvellous! She's a stickler for the old school of etiquette, is Constance, Countess of Lusca. The old order, the old tradition. The Queen of England may bow to the onward march of democracy, but Lady Lusca, never."

"How do you learn these things?" said Bane sarcastically. "By hanging on the fringes of society?"

"I resent that. Hovering, if you like—not hanging. Hovering suggests that I resist all efforts to pull me in. No; my grandmother knew the old lady in her prime, and I hear bits of talk. . . . I'll shove this tray away if you really don't want any more."

Blair carefully carried the tray out of the room and set it down on the floor at the side of the door. Then he returned, diving into many pockets in search of his pipe. Found, he packed and lighted it; then looking round the room noticed a packet of cigarettes on the mantelpiece.

"Here, Bag—have one of your own gaspers. A light? . . ."

"Thanks."

"I ought to go—but I linger. . . . By the way, did you ever catch sight of the girl? The young one?"

"What girl?"

"I mean, the young Lady Lusca. The old girl's daughter-in-law."

"I didn't know she had a daughter-in-law."

"Boy! There's an unusual piece. French, they say. *La Veuve Joyeuse*."

"Why 'gay widow'?"

"Well, her husband was killed in the R.A.F., you know, and it seems she got a bit tired of sedate, aristocratic widowhood and kicked over the traces. Got into a shocking row from the family and has been very subdued ever since. Seems she went to a charity first-night with a party of relations about a month ago. They drifted off after the show, and the girl found herself left with

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some bloke who suggested that the night was young and what about it? So instead of going home like a good little widow, she went with this chap to Ciro's and they supped and danced. Next day it was in all the columns—she's a celebrity—and did Mayfair chew it up!"

"I can't see anything wrong with that."

"My lad! Luscaj widows don't sup; they don't dance; they don't even want to do these things. And what is more important still, they don't associate with chaps any more, especially individual and separate chaps."

"Who was the man?"

"Oh, quite a nice fellow. In the Guards."

"How old is the widow?"

"About twenty eight."

"Poor devil."

"So say I. A bit tough trying to be *sans reproche* at that age and in these days. Well, I must fly. Best of luck with the exhibition! I'll be there. I've been boosting you up like anything."

"I'll need it."

Bane smiled, and diving his fingers into a jar on the mantelpiece produced a bar of chocolate. Armed with this he descended into the basement, where Mrs. Harris dwelt with her two lovely daughters.

Moya, the younger, sat at the kitchen table, bolting the remains of a kipper. In years a skinny twelve, her pointed, pale face promised all the rich beauty of her sister's; while her luxuriant dark hair, a mass of curls, was hastily dragged back from her tide-marked brow and secured with a bootlace. She wore a skimpy gym slip and a creased blouse. Mrs. Harris, so scrupulously clean about the house, seemed incapable of extending her principles to the human beings whom one would have expected her to make her special care.

"Oh, Mr. Bane! You've come!"

"Of course I've come. But you mustn't be late for school. Have a bit of chocolate?"

"Can you spare it? Oh, thank you. . . . I—it's your exhibition to-day, isn't it?"

"I'm nearly wishing it wasn't, Moya. I've got the jitters."

"Oh, you shouldn't. It'll be marvellous. And you've finished the old dame's picture, too?"

"Old lady to you."

"That's swell." She dived a questing hand into a shabby

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school-bag. "I wrote a poem for you. Where is it? . . . oh, this is it. I hope you'll like it."

He took the paper and read gravely, "The rainfall of Upper Burma in the months of July and '____'."

"Oh, no! That's my geography. Turn it over on the other side."

"A nice short poem, Moya."

"I like short ones."

He read :

"AN EXHIBITION," by MOYA HARRIS.

"The pictures of Mr. Bane
Are all painted in gold and silver.
That is how I see them.
He does not paint cows
Or lumps of things like other painters.
He does not paint saints like they seemed to do
All the time in the fifteenth century.
I like his pictures better than those at
The Tate.
He just paints ideas of
Beauty."

"It's lovely, Moya ; it's absolutely lovely."

She turned scarlet with pleasure.

"Do you really like it?"

"I think it's a marvellous poem. It makes me feel inspired. I ought to be able to paint when I feel that somebody thinks like that about my work. Gold and silver! What about the line drawings? Don't you like those?"

"Not much. You said yourself that they were just bread-and-butter."

"Listen, Moya," he said impulsively, "I'll paint *you* some day."

(There, you mug! he told himself. On the verge of getting lots of work and paying commissions and you commit yourself and your valuable time to a little two-penny-halfpenny schoolgirl, with only the promise of beauty which you may not be able to convey.)

She was pressing her hands together, speechless with pleasure.

"I'll get back early from school, Mr. Bane, and do your supper. Then you can tell me about the exhibition. And I'll write you a poem about anything you like."

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"I like you."

"Oh, I couldn't write a poem about Me. I'm too earthly."

"You should try an abstract subject."

"What's that?" she asked, bright-eyed like a robin.

"Oh, ask your teacher."

"Her!" said Moya with scorn. "She doesn't know anything about poetry."

"There are even people like that, Moya."

"Beastly people."

"Oh, you mustn't be intolerant."

"Oh, Mr. Bane!" exclaimed Mrs. Harris, appearing at that moment with a Ewbank carpet sweeper clasped to her breast. "I've done your room. What, chocolate again! Well, you didn't ought to take it, Moya; robbing him of his ration."

"Nothing of the kind, Mrs. Harris. I'm not as unselfish as all that."

"I gotta get off to school," said Moya. "Good-bye, all. Good luck, Mr. Bane."

(Intolerant! he said to himself as he toiled up the stairs. Am I intolerant, thinking of the days when I was as old as Moya is now?)

II

He saw again the island where his childhood was spent. It had a loch, cool and grey, fringed with reeds and silver birch; and always faintly you could hear the sound of great waves beating on the rock-strewn island shore.

At the head of the loch stood an old, old fortified house; Dunavesk House, with its solid walls, narrow windows, and four pepper-pot towers, one at each corner of the massive cube.

For four hundred years the home of the lairds of Dunavesk, it had been a wealthy house, owning wide acres of agricultural land and game forest on the nearby mainland, until in the eighteenth century vindictive George, despoiling the Highlands, had stripped it bare. Then came stark, proud poverty.

A grim old grandmother, arrogant and implacable, lost three fine sons—one of them the laird—in an autumn gale at sea, and found herself left instead with three unwanted children, two girls and a stupid, timid, cripple of a boy. Orphans, too, for the mother of Shena and Conan had died when they were small, and Vaura's mother had run away and abandoned husband, child, and the lonely island years before.

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Vaura—reflected Bagpipes, climbing the stairs of the house in Kensington—should have been the laird of Dunavesk. Fierce and proud, she was steeped in race and tradition; a girl of thirteen who ought to have been a boy, the only one of the three whom the grandmother tolerated. Shena—Bagpipes' sister—had the looks, but she was a smug, prim child, always clean, always right, and never losing an opportunity to "tell" on the others.

He, miserable young Conan, was the laird. Vaura never failed to give him his title; he could still hear her shrill, scornful voice when she came to drag him out of bed in the mornings . . . "Get up, Dunavesk!"

He remembered the bare, cold, uncarpeted rooms; the rough unsprung beds covered with old plaids; the peat fire in the big hall downstairs where they ate and played, the flames glinting on ancient trophies and blackened oak; Kirsty, the uncouth clanswoman who served them and struck out at them without warning; the meagre and monotonous diet of bread, porridge and fish.

Kirsty called him "Dunavesk" too, as a matter of course; the title still had power to make him wince. His grandmother would give him the old clan name of McBane; his sister, Shena, usually called him, "Oh, you nasty boy."

How Vaura's blazing pride was mortified every time she looked at him, pathetic relic of great men; and how she enjoyed poking and tormenting that pride!

"Stand beside me, Dunavesk," she would command when the minister called; "and keep your foot out of sight, for goodness sake."

"My grandchildren," the old woman would announce in her hard, clipped tones. "Vaura, daughter of my second son . . . Shena, daughter of my eldest son . . . and this is the laird. Hold your head up, McBane."

Blushing, tears in his throat, his head would drop on his chest. Mortified, humiliated, he wished he might have died in the boat with his father and his uncles.

The children did their lessons with the minister. Vaura was quick and impatient in her work; Shena always got full marks and would say, "There, I knew I was right!" Conan knew the answer but he never could get it out; he would sit there dumbly, fighting a kind of panic, while the minister said kindly, "Take your time, McBane," and the girls pierced his brain with their bright-eyed scorn.

He would escape to his bare little bedroom and draw, in pilfered exercise books. He didn't know that his drawings were good;

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they were just something to do, a way of escape. He kept the exercise books hidden under the plaids of his bed.

Vaura should have been the laird, that was certain.

One day they were out hunting bilberries on the side of the glen when they encountered two men, tourists, with rucksacks on their backs.

"Hey, boy!" one of them called out. "Can you tell us how far we are from the coast road?"

Vaura stepped forward, head up, eyes flashing, her body taut in its ragged tartan.

"Do you know who you are speaking to? You are speaking to Himself—to Dunavesk! Get out of this glen. We don't want you here. The coast road is over yonder."

Half awed, half amused, they had disappeared over the hill.

"Why couldn't you have stood up for yourself?" demanded Vaura.

Another day, she found an eagle's feather. Picking it up, she seemed to tremble with reverence.

"They told me a pair of eagles had nested on the scaur. . . ."

She snatched the boy's bonnet from him, and pinned to it the long eagle feather; then crammed it down on his head again.

"Now try and be like a Highland chieftain!"

She had dragged him back to the shore of the loch, and marched him through the clachan, between the poor huts where the great clansmen had once dwelled. Women and children had come to the doors to stare, but it was at proud, swaggering Vaura they had stared, not at the shy, limping boy who wore the valiant eagle feather, symbol of race, with down-dropped head and shamed eyes.

He had carried the eagle feather to his room, still pinned to the bonnet, and laying it on his bed and knelt before it and prayed. "Oh, God, make me a big, bold laird, and make my leg straight and let me grow to be seven feet tall. And please let Grandmother and Vaura and Shena die soon; then it won't be so bad, even if I stay as I am."

All this was long ago, more than twenty-five years ago, but the memories of that bitter childhood would not die; they were like an open wound in his mind. It was in him to have loved the island, the loch, and the home of his race; now he only shrank from the picture of them, background of so much humiliation, so many unmanly tears shed nightly into a coarse pillow, during the five years between the death of his father and his departure for the mainland, never to return.

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He remembered the minister who had seen his drawings and helped him to win the art scholarship at Glasgow . . . the many jobs he had done to earn his keep between terms. . . .

He regained his room, and stood, rather at a loss, in the middle of the floor. Why had he remembered these old, unhappy, far off things on this day, of all days ?

His grandmother had been dead these ten years. Vaura and Shena had long disappeared to the mainland, and out of his life. He was not seven feet tall, but perhaps God had heard the childish prayer and had given him a different kind of stature . . . he was contented.

He went round the room tidying his things ; glanced rather unseeingly at a newspaper. He could not settle to do anything worth while, and it was still too early to set out for Henriques Place.

He took down a favourite book, but for once the words on the page had no appeal. He unfolded the sheet of exercise paper on which the child had written her poem, and read it again. It caught him . . . there was something . . . sincerity . . . real values.

He said, " I'll start from here at eleven o'clock."

III

" Is Lady Lusca y at home ? She's expecting me. I've brought——" He gestured towards the square brown paper parcel under his arm.

The man-servant who had opened the door was elderly, spare, reserved, something like the house.

" Will you come in, sir ? I will ascertain if her ladyship is at home. This way, sir—and what name ? "

" Mr. Bane. Mr. Bane, the painter, tell her."

The room on the left of the door was a formal dining-room, of cloistered coolness, with white walls hung with plaster garlands, a painted ceiling upon which darkish clouds parted to reveal dim classical faces, and stiff Hepplewhite chairs set around the long gleaming table.

He stood, for the room did not invite one to pull out a chair. The servant was soon back.

" Her ladyship will see you. Please follow me."

The stairs were thickly carpeted in green ; footsteps made no sound. A door was opened.

" Mr. Bane, my lady."

The painter saw a charming sitting-room, very light, many

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shades of grey and mauve in walls and hangings, many silver ornaments.

"Mr. Bane? You're faithful to your promise. And you've brought my picture? I can hardly wait to see it."

Perfectly poised, dignified, gracious, here in her own setting the old Countess was even more awe-inspiring than she had seemed to him during those rather silent sittings—silent save for the droning of that elderly companion's voice reading aloud from "John Halifax, Gentleman."

His fingers felt clammy as he unfastened the cord and took off the brown paper wrapping. He set the canvas up on a small chair, removed it to another on which a more satisfactory light fell, and stood aside.

The old lady gazed at it without speaking. He tried to read her face; at least there was no distaste or disappointment there.

She said at last, "You have flattered me, Mr. Bane—no, no, not in the ordinary sense of the word, but you have given me the look I always longed to wear, that of one who has triumphed over life."

"I can only paint what I see, Lady Lusca." "

"Then you saw my aspirations. You are a remarkable young man."

"You are kind to use that word 'young'."

"How old are you? . . . Thirty-six? That is nothing. I was young until I was fifty, and then—but it doesn't matter. Here is an amazing thing I have just noticed. The face has an *inward* radiance, it is alive. The eyes seem lighted from within. You have a gift to be envied by all painters, Mr. Bane."

He made a quick, deprecating gesture.

"I can't take so much credit. It just came. I may never do it again."

"I hope you will, for the sake of your future work. Perhaps you know that this portrait is a present to me from the Earl and Countess?—my nephew and niece. They will be delighted with your work. You will be hearing from Lord Lusca; he has your address."

"Thank you."

"Won't you sit down for a moment?" She went back to her winged chair by the open window. "Forgive me, but I think your accent is Highland? Am I right?"

"It was clever of you to recognise it, Lady Lusca."

"Visits to Ross-shire in the old days are among my loveliest memories. Where is your home?"

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"I was brought up on a small western island. Broagg, not far from the mainland, but somehow remote in its atmosphere."

"A romantic start for a painter."

He smiled rather grimly. "I had no thought of becoming a painter. My early efforts at drawing were rather shamed and secret. I was the wrong kind of fellow for my background."

"But you found another and became the right kind of fellow?" she said in her clipped, gentle voice, serenely smiling. "Mr. Bane, you must take a glass of wine before you go. May I trouble you to ring that bell . . . thank you. Or would you prefer coffee?"

He said rather boyishly, "I should like some coffee. To tell the truth, I couldn't eat my breakfast this morning; I was excited. I mean, about the portrait being finished, and also, it is my exhibition this afternoon."

"An exhibition of your work?"

"Yes. Just a one-man show at the Cornel Gallery."

"I do hope it will be a success," she said sincerely. "I might have paid it a visit, but I'm presiding this afternoon at a charity committee at Claridge's."

She turned towards the door as it opened.

"Oh, Graystead, some coffee and sandwiches for Mr. Bane, please."

"I shouldn't have let you trouble," he said. "I meant to go."

Her eyes were friendly and understanding.

"What? After no breakfast? That was why I suggested the sandwiches. . . . I must look at my picture again."

She rose, and stood before it thoughtfully.

"I should like my daughter-in-law to see this. If you will hand me that house-telephone I can speak to her room."

She spoke into the phone, "Are you there, Joanna? Please come to me, I have something to show you."

The door opened and a young woman came in, very tall and slender, rather fine-drawn and pale, dressed in elegant, summer black with a large diamond brooch at her throat. (*La Veuve Joyeuse!* . . .)

"Look, my dear—my portrait. I'm entranced by it."

The girl came and stood beside her mother-in-law.

"Yes . . . it is beautiful, and so like you. Most portraits somehow just miss it, don't they? But this one is exactly like, and it glows. . . ."

"And here is the painter—Mr. Bane, my daughter-in-law, Lady Lusca." "

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Her eyes widened to reveal a glance of brilliance, then her eye-lids fell.

"How do you do, Mr. Bane."

"How do you do, Lady Luscaj."

She turned away immediately. . . . "There is someone at the door."

"Yes. Graystead is bringing some refreshment for Mr. Bane. . . . Thank you, Graystead . . . this small table—here. Now, Mr. Bane, if you'll sit in this chair."

The two women returned to the portrait and discussed it earnestly for several minutes. Bane drank his coffee from the delicate Wedgwood cup of ruby and gold porcelain, and ate *paté-de-foie-gras* sandwiches.

The old lady asked, "What are you going to do this morning, Joanna?"

"I'm going to Isabel's. The car is at the door now."

"Then you'd better go."

The girl turned at the door. . . . "Good morning, Mr. Bane."

He rose and bowed awkwardly, hardly lifting his eyes.

The old lady said, "I was thinking . . . would you like to show my portrait in your exhibition?"

His eyes lit up eagerly.

"I shouldn't have dared to ask . . . the portrait is your property."

"You may show it, with pleasure. I would like it to stay here this morning, as my nephew is coming to lunch and I think he should see it before the public does. Can you fetch the picture after lunch, in time for the exhibition?"

"Of course, Lady Luscaj. I could come for it in a taxi, and bring it back to you afterwards. This is very gracious of you."

She smiled. "Not at all. After all, it is your work." She held out her hand. "*Au revoir*, Mr. Bane; and thank you."

"I can't thank you enough, Lady Luscaj, for being such a wonderful sitter."

"What a good thing," she said, pressing the bell, "that I'm too old to have my head turned."

He was shown out into the street, and stood for a moment bewildered by the too-theatrical nature of the morning's events. The gracious acceptance of the portrait was for the time being forgotten, though in itself it would have thrilled him. It was the coincidence of Blair and his ridiculous chatter . . . and then to meet her, *La Veuve Joyeuse* as they called her—idiotic!—and to

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wonder whether he was dreaming! Obviously she had known him again, and just as obviously she wasn't going to know him. The girl of the Yorkshire hotel and the daughter-in-law of the Countess of Lusca were two different people. In a way it was satisfying to know who she was—he had often wondered—and yet it was a pity they had re-encountered one another in this anti-climactic manner. She, with her French quotations! He smiled to himself, remembering how frankly she had once talked, this frozen-faced girl in her mother-in-law's sitting-room.

He walked to the end of the Square with eyes downward bent, noticing nothing. At the corner a black car was standing. He looked up to cross the road and heard a tapping on glass.

There she was, sitting forward in the car and tapping to catch his attention. He hesitated, looking bewildered.

She opened the door of the car.

"Come inside. Quickly, please."

He found himself sitting beside her. They stared at each other, both breathing fast.

She said huskily, "Hullo, Bagpipes" . . . a kind of heart-catching, breathy whisper.

"I've been asking myself," he said, "was that other time a dream—or is this?"

"This is real," she said.

"You needn't know me," he said. "I'd understand."

"Don't be silly. Oh, there's so much to say."

"How far are you going?"

"To Carlton House Terrace. But I needn't." She leaned forward and tapped the driver's window. "Drive to Admiralty Arch, please. I want to get out there."

"What will he think?"

"It doesn't matter. This car is from the hire service. We don't keep our own car in London. . . . Bagpipes, I'm sure I'm in a dream. Did you ever think about me after that day?"

"Often. Did you?"

"Yes."

"Your funny quotations! What did Voltaire say?"

"Among other things, '*tout vient à point à qui sait attendre*'."

The car drew up at Admiralty Arch and Joanna sprang out.

"Anything else?" said the driver who was a communist, and didn't even believe in saying sir and madam.

"No. You can go now," said Joanna.

They walked side by side until they came to the park and turned down the path to the lake.

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"We can sit here," Joanna suggested.

From the cornflower blue sky over London the sun cast silver reflections deep into the shimmering lake. The ducks were drowsy in the heat; the air smelt of wallflowers and of the faint indescribable city fragrance.

He looked down at her slender hands in their thin, soft black gloves, playing with the gold clasp of her bag.

"Were you trying to be anonymous that day?"

"Of course. It gave me a great deal of pleasure."

"Tell me, is it a pleasure to escape from greatness?"

She laughed. "I wouldn't know. I've always worn my position so uncomfortably that it isn't so much escaping as relapsing."

"How should I address you? You're Lady Lusca y too, aren't you?"

She gave him a swift confiding glance.

"Bagpipes, whatever you are you're a real person—I knew that from the start. You talk my language. Listen, I didn't come from the Lusca y's world; I don't belong to it. My name's Jon—Jon Lewalter. That's the true Me. Does it come easier?"

He nodded. "Good. I know some French too. '*Que diable allait-elle dans—dans—*'"

"—*allait-elle faire dans cette galère?*" . . . You know now who my husband was. We met and married in France during the war. I used to live in Paris with my mother who was a singer—I told you some of this the first time we met. Hubert, my husband, was a pilot in the R.A.F., and he was killed when his plane crashed in Belgium in February last year. Fifteen months ago. I've lived with his mother ever since."

"Why?"

She lifted her hands and let them fall.

"*Why!*" . . . Bagpipes, with your uncanny perception you've asked a question it would take me a month to answer. You might as well ask me to tell you my life story."

"I may even do that some day." He groped in his jacket pocket, producing a rather flattened packet of Players and a loose match.

"Cigarette?"

"Thanks."

She let him light the cigarette, but as though forgetting to put it to her lips she held it between her fingers watching the pale smoke coil upwards.

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"How do we get back to the beginning?" she asked. "To where we left off?"

He looked at her incredulously.

"You don't think it possible to recapture what you once lost? Or perhaps you are that kind of person?"

"No . . . no, I'm not very hopeful. But it would be wonderful, all the same. The last thing you said to me, that day, was that one doesn't have to go on paying all one's life. You were wrong."

"You forget. I signed your menu after that. You said that you hoped my exhibition would be a success."

She gave him a taunting smile.

"What a memory you have! I meant, the last thing you said of any importance to me."

"No compliment to my menu pictures or to my exhibition."

She gave an imitation of a frown.

"Do we have to go on talking like this?"

He dropped his lighter tone, and said, "The last thing you said to me—that was of any importance—was that all my problems belonged to the far distant past, and it was high time I shook myself free of them. You were wrong."

"I don't think I was wrong. You were dwelling on morbid memories, I was certain of it."

"So were you."

She looked away.

He asked, with a genuine interest which warmed her rather doubting spirit, "Where were you going, that day? What happened to you after you left?"

"I was going on a visit to my sister-in-law. My husband's sister."

"That sounds harmless."

"Harmless? . . . Yes—harmless, that's the word."

"Do you by any chance mean that your late husband's family have been—well, unwelcoming?"

"No, oh no." She looked up in real concern. "No, they have been most kind. The fault all lies in me."

"You will talk in riddles."

"Only so as not to inflict myself on you. You can't really want to know about me."

"I might be interested."

"What do you want to know?"

"Why you live with your husband's people when you apparently find it so distasteful?"

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She dropped the half-smoked cigarette.

"To be devastatingly honest, I stayed on with them after Hubert's death because I thought I should like the position . . . because the alternative was to earn my own living in an England that wasn't even home to me. What I've found out is that you can't live for twenty-seven years in one world and then transfer yourself bodily to another one. These people live for their traditions. Race, breeding, family are everything. They received me kindly, because they thought they could make me like they are, could build me up to be the perfect widow for their son and brother. Outwardly perhaps they succeeded; I've tried to keep my part of the bargain. But I'm a living example to young girls not to marry above their station."

She said the last sentence with a quick, mocking smile.

He laughed.

"Why can't you walk out, if you feel like that?"

"Because for once in my life, I'm fulfilling an obligation. For once in my life I'm holding myself down . . . holding Jon Lewalter down. And if you'd ever known Jon Lewalter in the old days, you'd realise what went into the effort. All my life I've walked out of every situation that appeared unfavourable to me and my interests. I didn't even care who held the situation up so long as I got away. Now, for once, I'm trying to do what's expected of me."

"The Spartan boy and the fox?"

"I'm no Spartan, Bagpipes. I make a friend—like you—for the sole purpose of telling him where it hurts most. . . . And I think this conversation is getting one-sided. That day, after I left, what happened to you?"

"Very little. I arrived in London eventually, and went on working. An epic of the commonplace, that's my life."

"I wouldn't call painting a commonplace occupation."

"I don't get enough painting. Most of my work is commercial."

"You're not so æsthetic that you'd rather starve than commercialise your art?"

"I'm not that kind of person at all. Did you want me to be? It's a state of mind that went out with the Yellow Book."

She turned towards him suddenly.

"How on earth did you come to be the one to paint my mother-in-law's portrait?"

"Well . . . I used to know Simon Boldminer, long before he got his title. He was interested in pictures. When he was

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looking for someone to paint this portrait he thought of me ; it was decent of him, considering he'd gone up in the world."

"He was my husband's cousin. When Hubert was killed he came into the title ; there was no one nearer. Hubert had only the one sister, and she has only daughters."

He studied her face with his penetrating dark gaze.

"How are those regrets you were speaking of?"

She turned her face away. "Oh, Bagpipes . . ."

"That isn't really my name, you know." He paused, and added, "I might as well call you—*Veuve Joyeuse*."

The blood rushed to her pale face.

"Where did you hear that ? . . . All over the place, I expect. My God, it isn't fair. If you knew——"

"But I do know. Give me credit for a little sensibility. I know—but I hardly understand."

Her face looked sad and hopeless as she said, "I can't live up to them, Bagpipes. I'm not good enough ; I haven't got it in me. Heaven knows I've tried to be what they want me to be ; I've tried to be Hubert's widow, destroyed with him in a kind of civilised, aristocratic suttee. But I've got the most horrible, low nature ; you don't know how I hate myself."

"His death must have shaken you badly."

"It did. Of course it did——" She stopped abruptly, catching her breath.

"Why 'of course' ? One realises a wife's feeling for her husband."

"Oh, I suppose I was shallow and superficial even in that. We married on an infatuation like thousands of others in war-time. If he'd lived I might have failed him."

"Out of your depth ?"

"Yes. That's it. I've been out of my depth for two years. And before that."

"You didn't have a child ? It might have made a difference."

"Oh, I suppose it would. It would at least have settled me. Or would it ?" She regarded him thoughtfully, the narrow face with its irregular features, lines of anxiety, piercing dark eyes under the high forehead and rough hair. "Tell me about yourself, Bagpipes. Where do you live in London ?"

"Kensington."

"Alone ?"

"In two rooms in a house of apartments for single gentlemen. Our landlady is a character ; she cooks like an angel and laments unceasingly."

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"Have you many friends in London?"

He answered curtly, "I haven't many friends anywhere. A man in the house where I live—Blair Kirby—is about the only person I'm at all intimate with. And there are a few men in my own line of business."

"Don't you like women at all?"

"Call it prejudice, if you like. I suffered from too many women in my young days."

"Sounds dissolute!"

"You misunderstand me. I was thinking of a sister, a cousin, and a grandmother."

She said, "That time—when you asked me about my childhood, I guessed yours had been an unhappy one. I was right?"

"Yes, but it's a long time ago now."

"It still has the power to hurt you."

"Well . . . I suppose I—sort of—carry it with me."

"Tell me all about it. You can tell me, you know."

He looked at her suddenly, and rather deeply.

"I believe I could tell you, but . . . another time."

Her face lighted. "You want there to be other times? You really want that?"

"Do you?"

"Oh, I do. Bagpipes, you're the only person like *Me* that I've met in years. It's been so hollow, so artificial. I'm flattened out . . . gone right under. I've tried to accept it as a penance, but I'm not helped . . . I'm not absolved."

"Absolved from what?"

Her lips closed tightly. She stared across the lake, seeing nothing. He looked up at the sun through the glittering foliage of the summer trees.

"It must be nearly one o'clock. Will you come and have lunch with me?"

"Oh . . . you're in a hurry. I've kept you from some engagement, perhaps?"

"Not at all. But, you see, it's my exhibition this afternoon, and Lady Lusca was kind enough to say I might show her portrait, if I call back for it. There isn't much time."

"An exhibition of your work?" she asked eagerly. "The one you talked about, that other time? Where is it to be? Are you thrilled? Will it make you famous?"

He looked both anxious and excited.

"It's at the Cornel Gallery. I don't think it will make a stir. But it may bring me some work."

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"I wish I could come and see it!"

"Why not?"

"It would be in the papers that I was there. I'm not allowed to go to places unattended."

"What about lunch?"

She gave the slightest shake of her head.

"Couldn't. I'm supposed to be at Isabel's, and she—or they—might ring up. I must go."

"Will you meet me—to-morrow?"

She nodded without speaking, and then rose.

"No . . . don't get up, Bagpipes. Stay there until I've got out of sight. Someone might see me as I cross the Mall. Just stay on the seat."

"Where—to-morrow?"

"Here? Eleven o'clock?"

"Yes. How will you manage?"

"Oh . . . hairdresser or something. *Au revoir*, Bagpipes. It's been—wonderful."

He took her hand and held it for a moment.

"*Au revoir*—but only till to-morrow."

"You don't say my name."

"What am I to call you?"

"Jon. I'll think of you all the afternoon being terribly successful at the exhibition. It may help."

"I'll think of you. It *will* help. Good-bye—Jon."

He sat still on the seat, looking at the sparkling lake. She went very swiftly and did not look back.

IV

Her personality was breathless, dazzling, a bit overpowering. He found it difficult to acclimatise himself to this sudden re-encounter. He had not forgotten that day at the *Royal Hind*. He had thought the unknown girl an intelligent and provocative companion; good-looking, *soignée*, sophisticated and yet warm-hearted, a rare type not likely to be met again.

That she should be interested in him now was a harder nut to crack; that she should be in need of his co-operation and even friendship, still more incredible.

Caution and reserve warned him to accept her lightly. It was not unlikely that on thinking things over she herself would draw back, for in most ways they were poles apart. There was only

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that mysterious link of spiritual affinity which with dangerous speed makes strangers into friends.

It had never happened to him before. Perhaps she was sudden by nature . . . volatile, susceptible, unreliable. *La Veuve Joyeuse* . . . the girl who had broken out of the restraint of aristocratic widowhood. Understandable, and to be pitied . . . but was he the right one to do the pitying?

She'll soon be sick of me, he thought, with his usual self-depreciation. And yet it was true that they did talk the same language. . . .

Well . . . this meeting had given him a great deal more to think about than the mere fact of his exhibition.

He looked at his watch and, startled, set out to look for a bus. Changing his mind, he hailed a taxi and drove to Henriques Place. The picture was wrapped and waiting for him, and he took it straight to the gallery where he spent a great deal of time finding the best place to show it.

His agent arrived; and soon after, Blair Kirby and a few dignified pressmen from *The Times* and serious art journals, anxious to get their write-up before the public arrived.

"That's the chap who'll tear you apart—Abram Deane of *The Brushman*," said Blair encouragingly. "Follow me, and shake hands where I tell you. Otherwise a nod will meet the case."

From three o'clock people began to come in. First, the handful of friends and curious acquaintances; then art students; a few well-dressed women; dealers, darting like mice, here and there, wondering and assessing; unplaceable men, standing back with narrowed, critical stare, or shabby-coated, peering through magnifying glasses at the texture of the paint. Unplaceable men, who of course might be the ones who mattered.

"Constance, Countess of Lusca," got the most attention. There was always a little crowd standing before her; those whose knowledge of art was limited talking rather glibly about tones, values, and brush-work, those who understood keeping inscrutable silence. Here and there, one of the inscrutable ones would be seen making notes; they might be favourable, or perhaps just a reminder of a future engagement.

A few small red discs appeared in the bottom left-hand corners of frames. It struck the painter that these were the least likely ones; at first an apparently good omen, it later assumed a sinister aspect.

He shook hands, he nodded, he answered questions. And left early, feeling the least and lowest of all ant-like beings in the streets, curiously detached from his surroundings. He got tea

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at a crowded popular tea-shop, sharing a table with a couple who argued passionately over the rival merits of Pinner or East Sheen as a future dwelling place. The argument, at first friendly, had become acrimonious before he left.

He walked about the streets until it was time for the gallery to close; then picked up a cruising taxi and went to collect his portrait, a few minutes later handing it in at the house in Henriques Place.

Was she at home? . . . Was she still out? . . . Had there been trouble about her late arrival at her cousin's house, or had she explained it away? . . . He walked along the square, wondering, but only met a policeman and an elderly man pulling a Pekinese.

Carisbrook Crescent seemed homelike after such a day of adventures. An eager child served his hot supper.

"What was it like—the exhibition? Did everybody think it was marvellous?"

He teased her. "Nobody came."

She went quite white; she could hardly speak.

"Nobody?" she faltered.

"Well . . . just a few people."

She brightened up. "Oh, you mean a lot!"

"Not a crowd."

"Did they like the pictures?"

"We shan't know that until we get the papers to-morrow."

"Why? Don't people say right out when they like it?"

"No, Moya. It isn't done like that. People don't give themselves away."

"Why not? I should."

"Well, you see, it might give me a distorted idea of my market value."

"What's that?"

"Stop asking questions . . . I'm hungry."

She looked lovingly at the cheap watch on her tide-marked wrist. "I've got my homework to do, and Mr. Pratt wants his soup in the first floor front. Mr. Kirby's going to be late to-night."

"What is your sister doing, anyway?"

"Working late. When will you start painting me? What shall I wear? I wonder if Mum would buy me a new dress to get painted in?"

"Heaven forbid!" he exclaimed, throwing a spent match at her. "I'll paint you when I've time. I don't know when that will be. If the exhibition's a flop, it may be next week."

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If the exhibition's a flop? No, it wouldn't be a flop, nor a triumph; just a worth-while advertisement perhaps, proclaiming that Conan Bane existed. He felt confident and satisfied.

Sitting on the park seat next morning, watching the diving ducks, he wondered whether his companion of yesterday had contributed anything to his unusual peace of mind. It occurred to him that she might not come. Would he in that case suffer an emotional reaction?

She came while he was still thinking, and sat down beside him with her husky, eager, "Good morning!"

He felt quite disproportionately glad to see her, linking to-day with a rather dreamlike yesterday.

She began at once, "Were you satisfied with the result of your exhibition? I hope you were."

"I was. It did me quite a lot of good, and the critics were almost on the favourable side, I thought. It wasn't a flaming triumph—they only occur in fiction—but it did fulfil my expectations."

"The man who wrote in *The Brushman*," she said indignantly, "said that you hadn't anything new, but there was apparently no limit to the ways in which the old could be regarnished and given a deceptively novel flavour. Why 'deceptively'?"

He laughed. "And how did you come to read the art papers?"

"I ordered them all on my way home yesterday."

"Yesterday? No complications, I hope?"

"No. And to-day my mother-in-law has gone down into Buckinghamshire to attend a funeral, so I'm more or less free all day. At least no one will ring up and enquire about me."

"It sounds so enslaved. Must it be like that?"

"There's a thrill in escaping."

She wore a halter collar of white georgette on her black dress to-day, a small black hat with a short veil, elegant shoes and gloves.

He took a piece of paper out of his inside pocket.

"Here's a rather biased opinion on my work—by my landlady's daughter, aged twelve."

"Oh, let me see." She read it with undisguised interest. "It's lovely. Think of having anyone admire you as much as that!"

"She's quite a friend of mine. I give her chocolate and she gives me poems, so it isn't altogether admiration but just *quid pro quo*."

She handed him back the paper. "I like the sound of your background; it sounds home-like."

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"What do you mean by home-like?"

"Friendly, understanding, relaxed. Where you don't have to think, 'Am I saying the right thing? Is this what they expect of me?' Where you can be a little mad."

"Was your home like that?"

"Rather like that—I mean, when I lived with Mummy. We were often both quite mad, and it was the most perfect relaxation. Easy and lovely."

"Is your mother alive?"

"Why, yes . . . of course."

.. "If you're unhappy, couldn't you go back to her?"

She pulled at a glove finger.

"No. She made another life for herself when I made mine with Hubert. She married an American and is doing bigger and better concert tours all over the United States, rejuvenated, having the time of her life. Our lives just don't run together any more; we broke up for good. In a way . . . she was too young for me."

"Your father?"

"Funny you should ask about my father. He died a long time ago. He was an Englishman, a doctor of science; had a research laboratory and just lived for it. A very difficult, stern person who reduced everything to a formula. He met my mother when he was on holiday in Brittany and she was resting after a concert tour. They got married and came to England. Imagine Mummy in a provincial town with nothing to do but see that the dinner was cooked! And such a man, too, for Mummy who was all emotion. They drifted apart, and I drifted off with Mummy; we landed up in Paris, and the rest you know. I was sorry when he died, because in his way he had been fond of me. He was always buying me expensive toys, but a child prefers affection and a Daddy who plays with her. I didn't get those. He left all his money to the laboratory."

"How did you get educated in all this drifting?"

"Oh, I spent several years in a good English boarding school. Mummy wasn't bohemian enough to admire the kind of education a young girl gets in the back-stage dressing-rooms of continental opera houses. Do you wonder I'm such a mongrel? . . . Where did you learn to paint?"

"At various art schools, and I suppose I had a bit of it in me."

"What continental art schools?"

"None. I never could afford it. It was a case of earn while

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you learn, as the advertisements say, referring to knitting stockings, or making teapot holders."

"You've done awfully well, Bagpipes."

"Thank you."

"Lord Lusca, Hubert's cousin—oh, of course you know him—simply raved over the portrait. He's going to get you some commissions."

"That's very good news," he said dryly.

"Are you being cynical?"

"Not in the least. I'm thanking heaven fasting. Aren't *you* most flippant of tone when you feel most deeply? Or is that my own especial foible?"

"I'm like that too. And the trouble it has got me into!"

"Present trouble?"

"Not likely. Past trouble. That was another of the lessons I learned. I used to get what I called my topped-up feeling . . . the feeling that the world was made for me, that I couldn't lose. It was fatal, really. I thought I was a great person; Joanna the Great, I used to call myself. Wonderful Jon. *Wonderful?* . . . Poor fool Jon, more likely."

"It seems a clear case of a dead self and a stepping stone."

"Don't you believe it. The dead self doesn't lie down so conveniently under foot; you drag it along with you wherever you go. I enjoy reading Tennyson's poetry, but he does sort things out so beautifully into black and white; it galls you when you have to do the sorting yourself and find yourself landed with everything the wrong colour."

She watched a crawling bumble bee explore a scrap of broken moss on the gravel path.

"I'm talking too much. It's like me, selfish. Always thinking that people are interested in Me. I'll never get rid of that fault till I die."

"That's only introspection. I'm probably quite as bad."

She looked up. "I bet you've never been such a fool as to think yourself wonderful. You're much too well balanced."

"You're a bad character reader. Well balanced, my Aunt Fanny. I'm a morbidly introspective bloke, always have been. Self pity, too. Awful."

"You mean, having to make your own way? Wasn't there a lot of satisfaction in that? I'd have been terribly proud. I've never known what it was to be poor."

"Poor? Oh, that doesn't matter much."

"What's the worst thing, then?"

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He fidgeted, digging his hands deep into his pockets.

"Humiliation."

"Isn't that the same as I feel for being such a fool as I was?"

"That's self reproach. Humiliation is what other people make you suffer. It sort of opens you up. It doesn't heal. . . ."

"Who made you feel like that?"

"Oh, when I was a kid . . . I was a stupid, shy, unlikeable brat. Tongue-tied . . . inadequate. They all took it out of me. It was probably my own fault, but when you're a kid you just have to endure things. You don't know enough to retaliate, and you haven't got any philosophy."

"Whose fault was it you were so misunderstood? What were your parents doing?"

"My mother died of consumption when I was three. My father was drowned in a fishing boat when I was ten. We have sudden terrific storms round my native shores."

"Where exactly are your native shores?"

"An island off the north-west coast of Scotland where my ancestors were lairds for generations. It's a beautiful island . . . a loch . . . purple hillsides in autumn. From my little bedroom I could see the sunsets reflected in the water of the loch below the house. That was a long time ago. My grandmother—who brought us children up—was a dour old creature. She never forgave fate for robbing her of her three fine sons and giving her instead two girls and me. She made our lives a misery . . . nagging . . . punishments galore. Vaura, my cousin, was the only one who dared stand up to her; she was a tough girl, always hounding me about because I was such a third-rate little cuss . . . oh, yes I was. Fancy me the laird of Dunavesk, after all those fine upstanding ancestors! Me . . . a lame brat, dragging my ugly foot. . . ."

His voice was taut with bitterness; it was the first time in twenty years he had let himself be carried away.

Joanna looked down and saw the heavy, shapeless boot.

"Oh, Bagpipes . . . I—I never noticed it."

His head came up; he stared at her, incredulous.

"You—never—"

"No. Honestly I didn't. I probably never should have, if you hadn't mentioned it. I've been too interested in you, looking at your face and listening to you. Anyway, it's nothing, is it?"

"*Nothing?* . . . My God!"

She lifted her hands in a swift gesture.

"I can guess how it's got you down all these years . . . a sort

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of old black dog that you've got to carry about with you, that's how you've thought of it, isn't it? But, believe me, it doesn't mean a thing to your friends. I never even noticed it; I don't suppose I shall ever notice it again."

"Jon!"

"That's one thing. You've called me by my name."

"You've said such an unbelievable thing."

"Just a simple, natural thing."

"A tremendous thing to me."

"Then I'm glad."

"You see . . . I could tell you were sincere. So surprised, and spontaneous. You meant it. The most wonderful thing that anyone ever said to me in my life."

"Oh, no. . . ."

His intuitions were feminine in their quickness; he realised that she had protested to the point of embarrassment. Yet from her, a message to his doubting heart, there flowed assurance, comfort, strength.

He said, "You have done a great deal for me."

"No more than you did for me," she said quickly. "That day we first met. . . . I was in the depths. . . ."

He looked anxious. "That's wrong, coming from you. You have a gift; you'd make a good friend."

Startled, she turned away abruptly.

"That's the last thing, the very last thing. . . . I never had but one real friend—an influence, if you understand, a lovely person whom you know is better than your best self, but—well, it's something I can't tell you, Bagpipes. I'm too selfish . . . trying to save myself. . . ."

"Is this the remorse that doesn't die?"

"You're too perceptive," She seemed to shiver. "I don't want you to begin by knowing the worst of me."

"This is a beginning, then?"

"I hope so," she said gravely. "I do need you."

"Or just an escape? An adventure?"

"What! Sneaking away . . . alibis . . . making excuses? Believe me, it wouldn't be worth while if it were only for adventure."

"And yet you strike me as an adventurous person. That day when you talked about Paris . . . there seemed to be so much you could have told, and didn't. Of course, I was a stranger. You didn't tell me then you were a widow. I didn't even know you were married."

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"A woman would have looked first for a ring."

"A man doesn't think of such things. You talked about Paris and painters. Was your marriage an adventure?"

"It was. Hubert fell from the skies, literally, at my feet. He baled out of a plane over a field in Brittany."

"Brittany! Another adventure behind that?"

"No. Not an adventure." She hesitated for a moment, and said, "I was there on a holiday. I'd been ill . . . a nervous breakdown."

"You!"

"Is it so incredible!"

"I don't know you well enough to say. It seemed, on the face of it, not quite in character. A nervous breakdown . . . but of course, the war years in Paris. It must have been unspeakably grim."

She sat in silence, looking straight before her. When she noticed him glancing at her, almost apprehensively, she said, "Aren't tree shadows beautiful?"

"More beautiful in a snow-filled forest. Blue, and the sparkling winter light. . . ."

"You can't help making pictures."

He looked at his watch.

"Shall we go and have lunch?"

Her eyes were apprehensive.

"I don't believe there's a place in London where somebody won't know me."

"Leave that to me. There's a very good Greek place in Great Compton Street where you can be as anonymous as you choose."

Her tension relaxed.

"In that case we'll take a taxi. We can pick one up on the Mall."

As they walked she said with an amused smile, "We're just the same height, you and I. Perhaps that's why I find you easy to talk to."

"I once prayed to be seven feet tall," he confessed, dragging out the old hurtful memory without knowing why.

"What did you do that for?"

"I suppose when a child is bullied, and feels very small and helpless, his idea of heaven is a world where he is a giant and all his persecutors very minute people indeed."

"You poor little thing. Didn't your own sister stand up for you?"

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"Shena? Lord, no. No, Jon, as I look back I can see all the mistakes I made, I can see that I was the sort of child whom nowadays I should dislike intensely. But that didn't help the poor little devil who was the laird of Dunavesk. Surround him with a bit of care and understanding—to say nothing of family affection; tell him that even a cripple can acquire the manly virtues of his ancestors and not be a dead loss to his family, and he'd have grown up with a straight mind instead of a warped one."

"You're not telling me that *you* have a warped mind! If yours is warped, then I like them that way."

He flushed slightly.

"Would you call a warped mind one which broods eternally over those unhappy scenes of twenty-five years ago? Again and again in my mind I go back to them . . . remembering slights and hurts which stung and which can never be avenged or taken back by those who inflicted them. I've won through the years a philosophy which keeps me sane and steady in these days; but *those* days I'd give the world to forget—and I can't. I think of poor little Dunavesk, and boil with helpless rage against his tormentors. Even to this day. You see what a fool I am?"

He said the last words lightly, as though ashamed of what had gone before. He was ashamed, of having betrayed himself into such a revelation. She, Joanna, had provoked him to it.

When once again they were facing each other, across a small table, they met one another's eyes and smiled.

"It's so like the first time we met."

"You'll discover the meal here is much better."

"I meant, we don't start as strangers now."

"No . . . and it only wants a few words from Jean-Jacques Rousseau to make us feel quite at home."

She laughed.

"Why should you choose him? I can't remember . . . oh yes, he did say one appropriate thing . . . 'the most respectable of all the arts is agriculture.' In other words, the farmer who raised the guinea-fowl we're going to eat in a minute is a better man than you are, Mr. Painter."

"You sound more like your old self."

"What do you know about my old self?"

"Only that, like the rest of us, there must have been one, before it got snowed under. I think I shall start a society for the rehabilitation of Old Selves."

"Beginning with Conan Bane?"

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"The President, Secretary, and Treasurer are exempt from rehabilitation. I am the President, Secretary, and Treasurer."

His tone was light, but a hardness underlay it.

At that moment the waiter came to serve them. When he had gone Joanna said, "Do you mind if I ask you a question?"

He looked wary.

"Does it matter if I mind?"

"Please be serious. May I ask you this question?"

"Of course. Anything you like."

"You deserve a shock for being so sweeping. It's that old house of yours on the island, at the head of the loch. You didn't finish telling me. What happened to it?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"It's still there for all I know."

"Empty? Or does anybody live in it?"

"No, no. My grandmother is dead long ago, and I heard that the girls drifted to the mainland. Economic necessity, no doubt. They would make their own way. I suppose the place must be desolate."

"It does belong to you?"

He laughed. "It certainly doesn't belong to anybody else. My heritage. My millstone."

"I suppose it's impertinent of me . . . but it is such a pity."

He gave her a mocking look.

"A pity. A pity. The world is stuffed with them."

They finished their meal, and she said suddenly, "I must go."

"But you said you were free all day?"

"I didn't think. The day after your exhibition . . . you ought to have been at your studio. People will be ringing up. You'll lose business."

"But it hardly matters," he protested. "I can——"

"No, you must go back at once. And so must I."

He admitted to himself that she was right.

"What about to-morrow?" he said, trying to keep a certain shamed eagerness out of his voice. "Could you come?"

"No, I daren't. It looks suspicious, to be out by myself so often. Let me think . . . we ought to wait a week."

"It's what you say, Jon. Just how you feel."

"Listen. A week to-day I'll make an appointment for a hand treatment or something at Laurel's . . . you know Hanover Square? . . . well, it's in a turning off the south side of the square, I forget the name, but it's a corner shop—green and white paint, and green curtains. I'll be there at eleven, and out by half-past.

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Wait a little way down the street, and walk on ; I'll follow you. If I'm not there it's because something has gone wrong and I can't get out alone. Will you, Bagpipes ? ”

“ Yes. I'll be there. I'll be waiting for you.”

V

It was not in the nature of Conan Bane to treat any human relationship lightly, and yet in his reflective moments he made an effort to regard this new friendship as transient. He could not rid himself of the conviction that Joanna, Lady Lusca, had some concealed reason for wishing to make his acquaintance. Deep down in his nature, hidden generally beneath his strong activity, there was something which loved to dream rather than to reason, but he rarely allowed this faculty to see daylight. The sight of a face, the sound of a voice can set a sensitive heart beating with the strange, almost painful longing for an ideal life, with ideal surroundings, ideal realisations ; it can call to the imagination which lies dormant in the secret recesses of the heart.

Bane did not doubt that this strange and attractive girl had found in his society some answer to a perplexing mood. How long that mood would last for her was another matter. How long *did* her moods last ? For his part, he was forced to admit that all the time he had been with her he had been companioned by an unusual feeling of being understood, of having the better part of him rightly appreciated. All his life he had been interested in large things ; largeness of view, of emotion, and of action ; pettiness and narrowness shocked as much as they repelled him. That largeness he had seemed to find in this girl's mind ; or was it a mirage ? There was danger in exploring. Already he had to own that never before had he gone so far towards intimate exchange of ideas with a woman. Other women had been mere adventures on the physical plane ; excitement for the brain ; cheap wine for the emotions. The very novelty of so new and rich an experience made him wary.

He was not a lad ; he was well able to take care of himself on the emotional side, so if a friendship of the mind was what Joanna wanted, then a friendship of the mind it should be—so long as it lasted.

At the moment he had little real feeling about her, beyond a sympathy which her obvious restlessness had evoked. He did not like to see people unhappy in their environment, or people who

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were wasting their faculties for the fullest kind of living. The fact of Joanna's widowhood put her in a difficult position; that, and her lack of freedom to choose her own friends. She needed a friend, and so—seizing on the first likely person—she had expected him to play the game according to her own rules. So far they had advanced equally, move by move. The first move, in fact, would always be hers; he could follow so long as it suited him. When she was tired of the game, he, too . . . or would he be wiser to drop the whole thing now, in its early stages?

Though his temperament was ardent, he had a horror of what is called an "affair." The approach was so insidious, so varied; the end so depressingly constant. He should have married. There was a simple boy-and-girl engagement when he worked in Glasgow; it came to nothing. He let the years drift by, and then found that his nature demanded more than his circumstances could ever hope to satisfy.

He had learned by now how not to be inveigled into an "affair"; he needed the knowledge, and could use it.

Joanna was dissatisfied with her life; he was satisfied with his, which gave him a rock for his feet. His life, not brilliant, had a steady glow, with its changes and activities, freedom, work, strenuous or quiet hours, such companionship as he needed. It was a good life. Whatever happened it must not be spoiled; on this point he was resolute.

As the week went by he was disconcerted by the eagerness with which he was waiting for Thursday; but it was not in his nature to cut the appointment and thus slide clumsily out of a possible entanglement.

At the agreed time he was waiting for her. As they had arranged he walked on, and she caught him up.

"Hullo, Bagpipes. I'm such a fool, my heart's thudding. I thought perhaps I'd dreamed the whole thing and you wouldn't be here."

"It's been a long week, Jon. Have you been all right?"

"I was in a panic I wouldn't get away to-day. As it is, there are guests for lunch at one-thirty and I must be back. We've only got an hour."

"What would you like to do?"

"Let's get a taxi and tell him to drive to some place like Wimbledon. Then we can talk."

"What do we do at Wimbledon?"

"You say to the driver, 'terribly sorry, but I meant

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Waterloo.' Then he takes us back there, and I get out and get another taxi."

There was a forced gaiety in her voice, as though her nerves were a little on edge.

In the taxi they both found it hard to get beyond trivial conversation. The consciousness that there was so little time seemed to dry them up . . . a paralysing sense of anti-climax.

He said at last, "Has anything gone wrong?"

Her glance showed that she was impatient with herself.

"Nothing at all has gone wrong. I don't know what's the matter with me to-day . . . perhaps I looked forward too much to escaping, and now it's come I can't think of anything but how short it is and how soon I'll have to go back. Idiotic, isn't it?"

"Have you been busy? What do you do all day?"

"Do?" She gave a short laugh. "After breakfast I help my mother-in-law with her correspondence, and then I do the menus for the day and give them to Esther Lane who passes them on to the cook. Then I remind my mother-in-law of her engagements and look up my own, and do a bit of telephoning or shopping, and order the flowers and arrange them—unless Esther gets there first and jams them into the vases all anyhow. We have a few elderly friends in for lunch, or we go to their houses, and in the afternoon we do charity committees or make knitted blankets for the children's hospital. At night we sometimes go with Isabel and Simon to the theatre or a concert, or else we stay in and read and listen to the more restrained items on the radio. It rather limits one to symphony concerts and political talks, though on Thursday nights I do manage to slip into the staff sitting-room and hear 'Itma.' The staff sitting-room is getting to be quite a haven."

He looked sympathetic.

"Why, that's the life of a middle-aged woman."

"But that's what I am—or ought to be; a middle-aged woman. Now, tell me, what you've been doing."

"Oh . . . only routine work."

"Did you get some work through your exhibition?"

"Yes. I shall hold another exhibition some day."

"Has the little girl at your rooms been writing any more poetry?"

"Oh, probably. I daren't encourage her too much or she'd plaster me with poems. Actually I have been very busy."

They both sat thinking, why are we talking in this make-conversation way? What have we lost? This moment we longed

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for has only brought a sense of frustration. And each took the sole blame.

Too soon the taxi had brought them back to Waterloo Station. A kind of desperation drove them both to speech, when it was too late.

"There was so much I wanted to say——"

"I was going to tell you——"

"Can't you get away in an afternoon some day?" he said. "We could go down to the country. It's so beautiful at this time of the year, I'm sure you'd like it. It would do us both good."

"I'd love to. I've got an idea. . . ." She opened her bag and took out a small blue morocco diary. "On Wednesday I've promised to go instead of my mother-in-law to a sale at Grosvenor House. It begins at half-past two, and nobody's to say how long I stay there. I can rush in and buy a few things, and out again. You know the back entrance of Grosvenor House?"

"Yes?"

"Well . . . there's a street opposite——"

"I know. I'll be there at half-past two and wait until you appear. Then I'll walk away and you can overtake me."

For a moment her face seemed to lighten, then was once more downcast.

"That will be marvellous. I'm so sorry, I've felt a stupid fool to-day. . . . I don't know what has been the matter with me."

"Me, too. It's been too short, and I think it's fatal to look forward."

"You felt like that, too? Oh, I wish we were just starting. We've wasted it all, and it was so important to me."

"Don't worry, Jon."

"I'm becoming afraid to count on anything."

"That isn't the real You."

She gave him a grateful glance. "Thank you. Could you stop that taxi for me? . . . Thanks, again, Bagpipes. And good-bye."

When she was gone he walked rather aimlessly away, very dissatisfied in his mind. A morning wasted, and for what purpose? He was a busy man, and a romantic friendship was the last thing on earth that he needed. His nature had no time for its own complex moods, let alone the moods of another person imposed upon it. He asked himself what he expected to get out of these clandestine meetings with an earl's widow. Yes . . . earl's widow! How absurd and ridiculous it sounded, enough to shock

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any man into sanity, and yet there was something false there, something that led him away from Joanna herself. Hadn't he "got something out of it" already—that feeling of understanding from another human being which everybody craved? And, come to that, it was a pretty low part of his nature which had suggested the "getting" motive. Giving was more in friendship's line, and already if she could be believed he had given her an assurance, a sort of life-line, though he was still quite vague as to why she sought him so persistently.

He stopped to glance at himself, reflected in a shop's plate-glass window, and got no further than the strong, dark hair springing back from a lined forehead, and the rather fierce, challenging eyes of a man who stooped a little because he had to drag one regrettable foot.

No . . . nothing there but a warning.

He took a bus to his studio in Baker Street, and cast himself furiously into an orgy of work which lasted until Tuesday night, when he went home with a swimming head and discovered that he had a temperature of one hundred and two degrees. The germ of summer 'flu had found him out.

On Wednesday morning his first thought was of his meeting with Joanna, planned for that afternoon.

Mrs. Harris herself stood anxiously at his bedside.

"You look awful, Mr. Bane, if you don't mind me saying so. Better stop in bed, and I'll send one of the girls up to light your fire. It's chilly this morning, May or no May, and there's nothing like a good fug for the 'flu. What will you take for your breakfast?"

Tenderly feeling his head he gave a slight groan.

"About a quart of strong tea, Mrs. H. Nothing to eat. Hand me that thermometer, will you?"

His temperature had gone down a little, as temperatures do in the morning hours.

"I'm better," he said, "I'll be getting up soon."

"You didn't ought to," she said gravely. "That's just the way poor Mr. H. went. You've got just the same sort of constitution as him, Mr. Bane, if you don't mind me saying so. No resistance. Fall like a sparrow, and a hacking cough every winter."

He wanted to say, "Well, you slip out and order the coffin while I dress," but knew she would be shocked to the core.

He thirstily drank the tea she brought him; then shook two influenza powders into a glass of water, swallowed it down, and lay back to await results. When he decided that he felt less muzzy

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about the head he got up and shaved. In the middle of this task he had to grope for a chair, while the floor of the room behaved like the deck of a small yacht in mid-Channel. He told himself that this was a temporary derangement; he really did feel much better.

Discretion drove him back to bed. He would wait until one o'clock.

He fell into a half doze. When Mrs. Harris came in at twelve with a cup of Bovril and a copy of *Picture Post*, she took one look at him, exclaimed, "There! I told you so," and sent Olga off to fetch the doctor.

The afternoon became a hot and fretful torment; the evening was still worse; and two days later he sat, limp and clear-headed, in an easy chair, worrying himself to death over what Jon must have thought when he didn't turn up on Wednesday.

Of all the unfortunate things to have happened! She would wait and wait until she became afraid of looking conspicuous, there at the back entrance of Grosvenor House. She would go in again, and come out again, until she finally realised that he had failed her. And then she would begin to ask herself why. It was maddening; and all the time he was being maddened by it he was telling himself to keep it casual. Appointments were broken every day, all over London; come to think of it, he had made an appointment with a man at his studio for yesterday morning. Francis would have waited in vain; why should he worry less over Francis than over Joanna?

He thought frantically, I must get in touch with her. . . . I must tell her what happened. But he couldn't get in touch with her. He dare not write, for her sake, for he didn't know whether letters were common property at the house in Henriques Place.

He told himself that he was seeing the thing out of all proportion, but that did him no good. Angrily he drank the doctor's tonic, and argued with Blair Kirby about the ethics of gossip-column journalism. Moya, who had written several new poems, prudently kept out of his way. He found no pleasure in planning his illustrations for the new serial in *Britannia and Eve*. He could only think. Perhaps I did want it ended, but not like this.

On Monday morning, when the post brought him a thick square envelope of a delicate grey with a coronet on the flap, he left it standing against the milk jug while he asked himself unnecessary questions. Then he saw that the letter had been re-addressed to him from the Cornel Gallery.

He tore it open, and read,

Our Dreaming Done

8, Henriques Place,
S.W.1.

Thursday.

Dear Bagpipes,

I hope you had enough faith in me on Wednesday to know that I wasn't purposely letting you down. I am trying to tell myself that you had, because otherwise I should be too crazy with disappointment and anxiety. The thought of you waiting, waiting there—how long did you wait? And there was I—but, of course, I haven't explained yet. It was simple, really. Lady Lusca said at lunch on Wednesday that it would be nice for Esther to go with me to the sale, and, of course, Esther leapt at it. I did everything to discourage her, short of strychnine, but it wasn't the slightest use. Not only did she accompany me, but she adhered to me the whole afternoon. I couldn't escape from her, not even to rush out and warn you. I tried to induce her to leave early; I thought that if you saw us coming out together you would realise that I was accompanied by an ampelopsis, but she was enjoying every minute, and——!

I am not going to tell you how disappointed I was, because knowing me you know that too. Tell me when we can meet again. Don't write, because the letters are all taken by Graystead to my mother-in-law and she belongs to the *And-who-is-your-letter-from-dear school*. Ring up Mayfair 04074 and ask for me. Say you are Mr. Martineau and want to arrange a fitting. You must speak to me personally. I shall stay in all day Monday.

Forgive me for being such a trouble to you,

JON.

There was a telephone downstairs in the hall, but it was too public for the kind of masked-ball conversation he contemplated. Although eager to speak with Joanna, he felt that she had put him in a slightly ridiculous position. He set out for his studio early, so as to arrive before the man who shared the same floor and the same telephone.

He dialled the number she had given him, and in a moment a whining, well-bred feminine voice repeated the number.

"Can I speak to Lady Lusca?"

"Which Lady Lusca?" said the voice irritably. "Who are you?"

"This is Mr. Martineau. I wish to arrange a fitting for young Lady Lusca."

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"Oh. Well you can't speak to her ladyship this morning. She's busy with her letters. You can give me a message."

"Lady Luscaj particularly said she wished to speak to me herself."

"Oh dear!" said the voice petulantly. "I can't disturb her ladyship. You must tell me what you want."

"I want to make an appointment."

"For a fitting? Well, that should be simple. I'll ask her ladyship to ring you later."

"Will you please tell Lady Luscaj that I am on the 'phone!" said Mr. Martineau, rather too peremptorily for Mr. Martineau.

"I'm sorry," said the voice coldly. "You must ring again." And rang off.

He shrugged his shoulders. Sheer bad luck that he had chosen an inconvenient time. Now she wouldn't know, and he couldn't possibly ring her again. If anything was needed to make him devise some means of seeing her, it was this repeated frustration.

But while he thought out plans and projects, another letter came. It was from Simon, Lord Luscaj, and in addition to his cheque for the portrait, it gave him promise of work with these words:

"I can't tell you how delighted the old lady is with her picture, and I with the justification of my faith in your ability. Would you consider another commission? Lady Luscaj has one in contemplation for you, and will be pleased to see you in Henriques Place any afternoon when you are free to call."

Another commission? Could the old lady be going to ask him to paint Jon? In any case this letter gave him the entry he wanted; he would go to Henriques Place that very afternoon.

VI

"I'm happy to meet you again, Mr. Bane. Won't you sit down?"

He was struck afresh by the gracious air of the old Countess as she received him in her sitting-room. The air was full of perfume from bowls of sweet peas; the afternoon sunlight filtered through muslin curtains and glittered on silver frames and trinkets. He felt out of place in so feminine a room.

"You must excuse me while I find my other glasses," she said

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in her well-bred, musical voice. "These are the ones I use for reading and sewing. Eyes are very tiresome when they require so much humouring. Oh, where can I have laid them down?"

"Are these they?" he asked, lifting a gold case from the litter of magazines on a small glass-topped table.

"Yes! How clever of you." She adjusted the glasses. "And now, Mr. Bane, about this picture which has pleased us all so much."

"You have been kind enough to say so."

She asked with an almost youthful eagerness, "Did it attract attention at your exhibition? Did people like it?"

"I can't tell you how much it was admired, Lady Lusca—and I assure you, more for the subject than for my work."

She looked at him quizzically.

"I thought men had forgotten how to pay compliments. I believe there is something in the Highland blood! It really is gratifying in these brusque and hatefully matter-of-fact days. And please don't look embarrassed just because you have pleased an old woman whose memories are all of a more gracious age."

"I had a letter from Lord Lusca," he said.

"From Simon. Did he tell you why I wanted to see you?"

"He said something about another picture."

"Do you want another commission?" she asked smiling.

"Very much indeed."

"Good."

He thought, Now she will tell me it is Joanna. And at the same time came the awful thought, But I shall never get her expression . . . she has one of those baffling faces . . . it will be a failure.

Yet he wanted it to be Joanna.

"Do you know Lady Tella?" she was asking.

"I'm sorry, I don't."

"She is the daughter of one of my old friends; a nice girl, of about my daughter-in-law's age. Her husband is in India."

"Yes?" He moved his fingers restlessly on the arm of the faded brocade chair.

"She came here with her mother to see my portrait, and she said—so impulsively—'I have always longed to have my portrait painted.' I said at once, 'Why don't you, my dear?' And as we talked the idea over, she and her mother both became most enthusiastic. So I promised to see you and ask whether you would be willing to paint Lady Tella. She is a delightful girl, I assure you."

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Seeing that something was expected of him he smiled rather anxiously.

"You needn't tell me that, Lady Lusca y . . . a friend of yours——"

"I may as well tell you frankly, she is not a raving beauty."

"Oh, that doesn't matter. I——"

"I don't want you to be disappointed when you meet your new sitter," she said lightly. "But there is something there . . . a kind of spirituality. I shall be disappointed in you if you don't see it."

"You put a great deal of responsibility on me, Lady Lusca y."

"I have a great deal of faith in you. You are not much interested in material things, are you?"

"I don't think I am."

"Neither am I." She frowned, and then looked up at him wistfully. "You'll think that a strange or even thoughtless remark, coming from a woman who has had more than her share of earth's good things all her life; yet I can honestly say that I never loved 'things' for their own sake, and as I get older they mean less and less to me. I feel that Fate could snatch them all from me without breaking my heart. The only things from which I could not bear to be parted are spiritual . . . my memories . . . my loves . . . my traditions. I am a proud woman, Mr. Bane . . . do you think pride a vice or a virtue?"

He said gravely, "I don't know. I have none."

She looked startled.

"I can't believe that!"

"I have so little in myself to be proud of, and my memories are tangled up with the thought of what might have been."

"Then I won't question you, Mr. Bane, though I'm tempted to a stimulating conversation. We'll return to Lady Tellar. Can I take it that you'll accept the commission?"

"Because the sitter is a friend of yours, Lady Lusca y, I shall be glad to do so."

"Thank you. I'm so delighted. I shall telephone her this evening. Will you want her to sit at your studio, as I did?"

"That would be most convenient to me, but I could work at Lady Tellar's house if she prefers it, provided there is a suitable room and the right kind of light."

"She lives in a flat, so it probably wouldn't be suitable. I think she had better come to your studio. Would you like to fix a time for the first sitting? I can suggest it to her provisionally."

"May I look at my diary?"

Our Dreaming Done

He studied for a few moments, and said, "You could suggest Tuesday at eleven-thirty. If that isn't convenient, perhaps Lady Tellar will let me know."

"Thank you . . . I'll make a note of that." She scribbled a line in a tiny ivory-backed notebook; then looking up she seemed to hesitate a moment before she said, "Mr. Bane—you may think it a strange thing to ask—but do you think that a girl like my daughter-in-law could become interested in painting?"

"I can't see any reason," he said, "why any intelligent person shouldn't become interested in painting, provided he or she has the will to become interested in anything."

"It's strange you should say that. Frankly, I'm not happy about my daughter-in-law. She seems to lack that *will* you mentioned."

He did not make any reply.

Lady Lusca y sighed, and said, "My thought was that if Joanna would accompany her friend to the sittings it might prove to be an interest for her. Perhaps you could talk to her about pictures . . . show her books?"

"I can't talk while I'm painting," he said, rather too hastily, and then smiled to take the edge off the remark.

Lady Lusca y looked at him regretfully.

"I am suggesting something that will be very troublesome to you."

"No, no," he answered. "Of course I will do anything—anything."

"That is generous of you. You know that my daughter-in-law lost her husband in the war?"

"Yes."

"That is a terrible shock to any young woman. But she ought to be getting over it by now and taking some pleasure in living. Instead of that she is listless . . . apathetic . . . almost more so than she was a year ago. She is a particularly intelligent girl, a sensitive type; she should enjoy the quiet pleasures of our life. There is so much that is beautiful left to her. Of course she is still young, and I suppose she often thinks how different it would have been if Hubert had lived; she would have held a brilliant position in society . . . gaiety . . . parties . . . so much that now she can never enjoy. Yet I don't want to suggest that she is rebellious against her lot; she has, on the contrary, a strong sense of tradition and she is very loyal to our family. There is a latent nobility in her character, I have great hopes of her . . . if only she could find some interest in life. There *must* be something.

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It occurred to me that you might awake in her an interest in pictures ; I should be so glad if she would become a collector."

"I should be glad to show Lady Lusca some pictures ; the enthusiasm must spring from her own heart."

"How right you are!" said the old lady impulsively. "Mr. Bane, I lost my husband, I lost my only son, and yet my life is full. A widowed broken life can be rounded and gracious. I'll ring for my daughter-in-law. I should like her to speak to you."

He got to his feet and began to turn over some books on a side-table.

Presently he heard the door open.

"You have met Lady Lusca before, Mr. Bane?"

"How do you do, Lady Lusca?"

But Joanna was holding out her hand and making him take it.

"How are you, Mr. Bane? Have you come to see how carefully we have hung your picture?"

"I forgot to tell you," said the old lady, "that we have hung my portrait in the dining-room. You must see it before you go." She turned to the girl. "Joanna, Mr. Bane is going to paint Merle Tellar."

"Oh . . . I'm glad."

"At his studio. And we thought you might like to accompany Merle to the first sitting on Tuesday. Mr. Bane has some books of beautiful pictures you would enjoy seeing."

"I should like to go."

"Well, that's settled, my dear. By the way, Mr. Bane, what would you like Lady Tellar to wear?"

"Oh . . . tell her to dress in any way that she thinks expresses her personality. If there is any alteration I can discuss it with her when she arrives."

"Thank you . . . Joanna my dear, perhaps you will show Mr. Bane downstairs." She smiled, holding out her hand. "This is a mysterious weekly occasion known by my butler as his 'half day'. Before you go, Mr. Bane, you must see whether you approve of my hanging of your picture. Good-bye, and come to see me again soon."

"Thank you, Lady Lusca; I will. Good-bye."

The door closed behind them. On the stairs Joanna said, "Did you get my letter?"

"Yes. I rang up that morning, but I didn't have much luck. I was answered by a female voice which sounded distinctly putting off."

She made an exclamation of annoyance.

"That would be Esther. She never will give me a correct

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message. She didn't tell me anyone had rung. I thought—but it's done with. How long did you wait for me that day?"

"It was a double default," he said. "I wasn't there. I was in bed with a sharp attack of influenza, worrying about you."

She gave him an intimate amused look, relief in her eyes.

"Come in the dining-room . . . look, there's the portrait."

"Just where I should have hung it myself."

"Tell me, how did this Merle Tellar arrangement come about? You never had the nerve to suggest that I——"

He said gravely, "Lady Lusca was kindness itself. She only thinks about what will be good for you."

She gave him a quick glance, without smiling.

"Honestly, Jon, she wants you to take an interest in *something*—in painting, for instance, if you will."

"And she chose you to show me how! It's such a piece of luck I can't believe it."

He made a grimace.

"No compliment to me. She thinks I'm safe. A maimed repellent sort of crock."

She touched his sleeve with a sudden impulsive gesture.

"You know some charming adjectives, my dear. Listen, I'll take an interest in pictures, I'll do anything, I'll clean your brushes, I'll hold a bunch of lilies over Merle Tellar's head . . . because I want to come to your studio so much, so much, Bagpipes. But I daren't stay talking any longer. I'll look forward to Tuesday, and I'll find some way to see you alone." She walked towards the hall door, and said clearly, "Good-bye, Mr. Bane."

"Good-bye, Jon," he said softly, and went out into the street.

He had a good deal to think about and some preparations to make, for he was anxious that this portrait should be a success, and nothing would divert him from concentration on his work.

He waited with both excitement and conjecture for Tuesday. Lady Tellar proved to be a tall, shy young woman with doe-like eyes, an intense expression, and a slightly open mouth. She did her hair in Madonna style, and wore a nun-like dress of grey woollen with two rows of magnificent pearls.

"Is my dress right?" she asked nervously, looking round the studio as though it were a dentist's surgery.

"I'm not very keen on painting grey tones," he said cheerfully. "They look cold in a portrait. You know. Lady Tellar, I see you in rather deep jewel-tones of red. Have you a dress like that?"

"Well . . . I have . . . but a very old one."

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"Perhaps you'll wear it next time. But meanwhile if you'll sit here I can make preliminary sketches. I suggest a three-quarter length portrait like Lady Lusca's . . ."

"Oh yes. That would be very nice."

"And the background shall be a curtain . . . violet . . . stiff silk."

She sat down anxiously, angular with every limb taut. He arranged her head and hands and told her to relax and to go into a pleasant day-dream.

"Think about food," suggested Joanna. "It gives you an ethereal look."

"Oh no, Joanna, please!" implored the nervous sitter, quivering all over.

Bane looked at Joanna sharply; under the brittle gaiety of her remark he sensed a tension, a reasonless suspense.

He offered her a book of prints with a curt, "Here—look at this. Try the chair by the window; we mustn't embarrass the sitter."

But while he worked he could not lose consciousness of that rather strained figure by the window, motionless and silent as it was. His concentration on his work was less controlled than it had ever been. Nervous irritation mounted steadily; he began to talk trivialities with his sitter.

The hour passed slowly; five minutes before the time he had intended he found himself saying. "That's all for to-day. Thank you for your patience. No, I'd rather you didn't see it . . . only a preliminary sketch, you know . . ."

Lady Tellar rose. . . . "I hope I haven't been too awful."

Five minutes after they had formally taken their leave, Joanna returned to the studio.

"I sent her off in the car and came straight back." She pulled off her hat and held it in her hand. "Can I walk about and look at your things?"

"Of course."

She gave a nervous laugh. "You've quite captivated Merle."

"Oh, that's just my technique," he said, throwing chalks into a box.

"I hope you'll be able to get that expression of hers," Joanna went on, "as though she were just going to break into a moo. Isabel—Simon's wife—says she should be painted knee deep in daisies, with one horn slightly crumpled."

"You shouldn't have told me that. It will haunt my subconscious and ruin the portrait."

She laughed.

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"I should think my silent presence is enough to do that. Especially when you're supposed to be guiding me to an interest in pictures. How do you propose to go about it?"

He went on tidying methodically.

"Lady Lusca is fond of you, Jon. I don't approve of sarcasm at the expense of her efforts on your behalf."

"Sarcasm!" Her face flamed. "Don't you see that she's a world away from understanding me?"

"Perhaps I too am as far from understanding you."

She went over to the divan and picked up her hat.

"After that, I'd better go."

"For God's sake don't be touchy!" he said curtly. "But I tell you I don't like this clandestine business of our meetings. It puts us both in a false position."

"Do you imagine that I like it?" she said bitterly.

"Sit down." He pushed forward a chair, and she rather listlessly obeyed him.

"Now!" he said. "Are you worrying over something that happened in the past?"

"What makes you think that?"

"Answer me."

"I suppose I am."

"Something to do with your husband?"

"No."

"Before you met your husband?"

"Well—yes."

"Let's be frank. A man, I suppose?"

"Good lord, no."

He went on methodically tidying the studio, as though he did not notice she was there. When he had finished she was leaning against the end of his big divan watching him thoughtfully. Her gaze disturbed him. Her eyes held a dark brilliance, half-veiled by her eyelids. Whether they were hard or smiling he could not see, above the appealing hollows of her cheeks and that long mouth, the lower lip a little out-thrust; the expression was typical of her when she was unsure of herself.

"Well, that's emphatic enough!" he said, shrugging his shoulders.

She moved away from the divan and began to put on her hat.

"You said that one day you'd take me in the country. Did you mean that?"

"Could you come?"

"I'd make it possible to come. I haven't failed yet to do

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what I said I'd do . . . except that once, at Grosvenor House. In fact I'll come on Saturday."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I'm supposed to be going to see an old friend of my mother's at Dorking. I'll meet you at Victoria Station at half-past two."

He gave her a sharp look.

"More evasions?"

She lifted her hands and let them fall.

"If you feel that way it's no use. We'd better finish."

"Look here——" He checked her passage to the door with a gesture. "Let's have this out. What is it you want from me?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all . . . but everything."

"That isn't an answer."

"Meaning it's a damn' silly answer . . . you're right, Bagpipes, it is. But what is friendship, anyway? Nothing, and everything."

His harsh look softened.

"Don't misunderstand me, Jon. I'd give you anything that's in my power to give——"

"Then go on! Do that. It's all I ask."

"And if one of us gets cut up in the process—well, we're risking the hell of a scandal."

"You've changed since you became so intimate with my mother-in-law," she said, stressing the adjective.

"She's a great lady. I know since I met her what those two rather romantic words mean."

"Oh, I admire her too, tremendously. But you don't have to live with her, Bagpipes; you don't spend your days in a losing battle with her standard of *noblesse oblige* like I do. You're just a novelty to her, I assure you. She amuses herself by condescending to flirt with you."

"What an abominable thing to say."

"Yes, that's the kind of person I am, but I don't distort the truth. In a way I'm generous too. Something absurd inside me invariably looks for excuses for other people, particularly when they misjudge me."

With a sure hand she had touched his weak point. If there was one thing he hated it was a mean or ungenerous nature, and he had almost been guilty of seeking no excuse for her.

She gave him a look which was at least sincere.

"Shall I go now? And you don't want Saturday?"

"Of course I want it, Jon. But how far down the slope does this take us?"

Our Dreaming Done

"You can back out at any moment you like."

"How can you lie to *her*?"

She said angrily, "I haven't lied to anybody—yet; I hope I shan't need to. If you were cheated of freedom and friendship, would you snatch them when they offered?"

He said quietly, "Shall we not discuss that?"

She gave a deep sigh.

"How impossible it all is. If I thought I was spoiling things for you, I'd walk right out, Bagpipes. But I'm not convinced yet that you want to do without me."

He passed his hand across his forehead.

"Did you say Victoria Station, at two-thirty? I'll borrow a car."

A sudden smile lighted her whole face.

"Oh, can you drive a car?"

He said dryly, "Strange as it may seem, I have passed a special driving test for persons suffering from physical disability. You needn't be afraid to risk yourself with me."

The scarlet rushed to her cheeks.

"You know my remark was absolutely innocent of that meaning! You're in a vile mood to-day."

"Just a digging, delving-under-the-surface mood. I'm sorry, Jon. It was touchy of me. You see the sort of person I am."

"I hope I do . . . I hope I always shall."

He said suddenly, "Do you know . . . when Lady Luscy told me she had a commission for me, I thought she was going to ask me to paint you. I was waiting for it—wondering what I should say."

"Me! Why on earth should the family want a portrait of me?" She looked genuinely surprised. "To hang in the great hall at Darchingham, labelled 'The One Who Never Got Here'? You could have worked all that out for yourself, if you'd paused to think. We ex-countesses don't get painted. We get laid away with the old brocade curtains from the blue drawing-room in the Dower House, which is not quite the same as the family mausoleum but a kind of purgatory in preparation for it."

"Must you make theatrical speeches?"

"I must. I can't help it. Did you want to paint me, or not?"

"I would have liked to try, but I should have despaired of capturing your expression. It is never the same two minutes together. People with so much vitality make bad subjects. No, I wouldn't have painted you, Jon, even if they'd asked me."

"You make my vitality sound quite vulgar," she said; adding, "Why do we keep getting at one another like this? I don't mean to."

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"Neither do I. Must you go? It's ten minutes to one, and I usually make some lunch on the gas ring. Will you stay and share it? I've got two eggs and some un-named jam tart."

"No, I must be back for our lunch at one-thirty. There'll be great curiosity to know all about the sitting. I'll tell you what I will do before I go; I'll make you an omelette. Where are the eggs?"

"Here, in the basin? . . . Can you?"

"Can I!" she said scornfully. "And I with a French mother! . . . May I put something on to save my dress?"

She seized one of his overalls and tied it round her neck by the sleeves.

As she broke the eggs and proceeded efficiently, he stood beside her watching with great interest. It was intimate, friendly, restful.

"It's been quite a morning," he said; "Lady T. posing, and you cooking."

She gave a frank laugh.

"Bagpipes, you really are a fraud; I never heard such a line of professional patter as you put out to that poor woman. When you got on to her noble Empire-building husband guiding the destiny of India through stormy seas, I thought I should have passed out. Did you know he is a kind of glorified sanitary inspector?"

"She didn't tell me so; she just lapped it up."

"Oh, you obviously hypnotised her. I hope she falls in love with you. I'm just in the mood to appreciate a few complications in other people's lives."

"Throwing me to the wife of a sanitary inspector? I thank you."

"Look, my dear—this is done." She displayed the golden omelette. "I'm off now. Eat it immediately while it's still hot."

She pulled off her improvised apron.

"Saturday at Victoria, half-past two; that's settled?"

"Yes. If nothing goes wrong."

She turned at the door, and said impressively, "Nothing will go wrong this time—nothing!"

VII

Screened from the road by a deep plantation of trees, the grassy pasture sloped down to a lazy stream which drowned a fringe of buttercups and speedwell. That warm radiance which falls upon

Our Dreaming Done

English fields in the month of May, sparkled in the grass and in the wrinkled silver of the water's surface. In some great bannered tree a cuckoo called, persistent, mocking, again and again and again. Then she flew.

"There she goes!" murmured Joanna, watching the faery bird whom mortals so rarely see.

She had taken off her jacket, and sat in the grass in her slender black skirt and a blouse of white muslin spotted with black embroidered dots, the long full sleeves gathered in at her narrow wrists. Her sleek dark hair followed the curve of her head, and belled out upon her shoulders.

The man sat beside her, more consciously seeking the full delight of a Spring day near to the green breast of Nature. He listened and heard a hundred tiny sounds; leaf and bird and insect and breeze. The burring rumble of a far-off train made the peace of the country more complete.

"We're far enough from London now, Jon."

"In every sense of the word."

"I was thinking . . . it's a long time since I sat within sound of a stream. If anything could make me want to see a Highland burn again it would be that poor English apology for one. To see it bursting in spray over the rocks; and the scarlet berries of the rowans hanging down; and the heather hills above climbing to the sky. To see the brown torrent and smell the peat . . . to drink the ice-cold water and watch it drip silver off your fingers, and chase the trout from the deep roots under the bank. That's what a stream ought to be like."

"You said that as though you meant it."

"Strangely enough, I do mean it."

She gave him a shrewd look.

"Would you go further still?"

"Further than—what?"

She put her hands back in the grass and leaned on her stretched arms.

"Tell me about that island of yours; the island with the loch. Paint a picture for me."

"I never was any good at landscape."

"That's not true. It's an evasion, and you know it!"

"Well . . . in the south of the island there's a small village built round a bay so narrow that really it's just an inlet of the sea. There's a horse-shoe of tiny cottages—so small—and a pier—you'd call it a breakwater—where the boat comes in every day from the mainland."

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"How far is the mainland?"

"Only two sea miles away. But an island is always an island, you know; it has an air all its own. If you stand on the brae above that village and look across the ocean you'll see fairy peaks, opalescent, rising out of the mist on the horizon . . . the coolins of Skye. That's a magic sight to thrill you. The heavy seas come pounding round the island, day and night. You get used to the rise and fall of the roaring sea . . . it's in your ears. When I went away I missed it."

"So you did miss something?"

"Physically, not sentimentally."

"Did you sail a boat on the loch—your loch?"

"You should have seen the ancient boat we had; it was anything but water-worthy. It took one person to fish and two to bale out the rising tide. There were small boys in the clachan who could swim across the loch. Dunavesk never learnt to swim; he was afraid to try, and so handicapped, poor little devil."

"Never mind poor little Dunavesk. What do you mean by the clachan?"

"The tiny hamlet by the loch-side where some of our people lived in thatched black-houses, cabins with mud floors and a hole in the roof for the smoke to go out. You can't imagine how poor it was . . . and yet in an evening when the sunset was reflected in the silver waters of the loch, and the plumes of smoke went up straight and blue, and the small houses were black against the golden afterglow, it was peaceful and beautiful, like another world."

"What do you mean by 'some of our people'? Relations of yours?"

"All the island people were in a way relations of ours. But the people in the clachan all had our name. They were descendants of the great clansmen who fought with my mighty ancestors in the days when McBane mustered forty claymores from the island of Broagg, and over a hundred more from the Bane lands on the mainland."

He added dryly, "And rather pathetic descendants, too. Terribly poor, like their laird. No great men now, only dour crofters who can hardly get a living for their scrawny wives and children."

He could tell she was deeply interested.

"What do they do for a living on the island?"

"Well . . . the clachan is more or less self-supporting—if you can call it support. They dig their own peat; they grow a few

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potatoes and roots. They fish and collect sea-gulls' eggs. And the really opulent among them possess one black cow which is kept tethered to the door handle."

"Why?"

"Don't ask awkward questions; I've forgotten. I was only fourteen when I left for the mainland. The people in the village by the sea have proper fishing boats. They also have a small weaving concern where tweeds are made up. They have a Post Office—isn't that urban?—and a school that doesn't function and a kirk that does."

"Why doesn't the school function?"

"No teacher."

"Why?"

"Can't stand the life. The kids go by boat to the mainland, in good weather. In bad weather they help their dads. The boat brings in the mail, and shoes, and oatmeal, and the higher products of civilisation such as Beecham's Pills, tobacco, and the newspapers a day old."

"So you can buy shoes there?"

"Yes. They hang them up, strung together outside the Post Office, and you take your pick. I never wore shoes—except on Sundays—until I was fourteen. I wore a kilt which had belonged to my grandfather, and a jacket which was also practically an heirloom and an equally ancient plaid when it was cold. The plaid went on my bed at night."

"Why were you so poor?"

He went on in the same amused tone, "Because the King of England and his brother robbed me of all my possessions in 1746."

"When they despoiled the Highlands? Oh, this is amazing . . . to meet somebody to whom it actually happened."

Her hand stroked the shining grass.

"Bagpipes, you talked about it so naturally. How long is it since you talked about it?"

He stared straight before him.

"I've never talked about it to anyone before. I've never thought of it without a bitter hurt."

"And now?"

He gave her a searching glance, and looked away again. After a silence of minutes he said, "There was no hurt. Something must have happened to me."

All this time he had been pressing on that old wound, martyring himself to please her, and now he realised that there had been no martyrdom, no sting—or only the ghost of one.

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A generous impulse promptly suggested that to her might be given some of the credit for this, but he struggled against it. Warned by experience, he usually gave a cold reception to first impulses; moreover reason assured him that the necessity still existed to protect himself against her.

The stream which he had maligned flowed away into the distance and lost itself among trees, and more trees. Greenness suggested repose, sunlight warmth, and dove-purple shadows a very pleasant melancholy of the mind; altogether an inviting state for a warm lazy afternoon in May.

He was surprised at himself for having remembered so much about the island. Had he erred or exaggerated? In his memory he began to turn over the coloured pictures imprinted there, and was astonished at their attraction for him. Of course, there were no people in the pictures; cautiously as yet he left those bygone scenes unpopulated. And now there was neither janglement nor distress; only the dawn colours of a northern sky and the blue-and-green shot silk of the northern sea, the wrinkled gold of the loch at sunset, and the brave stones of an ancient home, lichen-tawny and romantically turreted. The almost-forgotten Gaelic tongue, like the roar of wind and thrash of wave, like the dragging down of rocky beaches and the whisper of rain in the autumn haar, sang to his remembering ear.

He came abruptly back to this softer region of trees and meadows. Thank God he had the power of detachment, of not being too moved by his surroundings and circumstances. London he could use without either hating or loving it; this country afternoon, also.

He said rather self-consciously, "Seems inconsistent to be sitting in a Sussex field talking about a place several hundred miles away."

She did not reply. When he looked at her closely she appeared to be watching the flight of a long trail of rooks across the sky, the rhythmic rise and fall of wings as the main body went purposefully on to seek a likely field to despoil, a few stragglers panting in the rear. But her eyes were blank; she was in a trance of thought, herself somewhere out in the blue.

"Come back to earth, Jon."

She turned and looked at him vaguely.

"What were you thinking about, ten thousand feet up?"

"I was thinking about Hubert," she answered promptly, and then seeing his surprise, added with a laugh, "Did that come out very pat? I'd better explain . . . it's just association of ideas. The last time I was out in the fields it was with him."

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"Highly commendable of you, Jon," he said drily. "Very widowly."

She looked at him closely. There was some sadness as well as bafflement in her eyes.

"Do you really think me so hard-boiled?"

"I thought there were some things you wanted to forget."

"You've got a very wrong idea of me," she said slowly. "I shall never forget Hubert. No one could. He was so gay and vital. Good-looking, in a clear, fair English way. Dashing. Irritating, mind you . . . and perhaps superficial; but so was I. When someone so alive is suddenly nipped out like a candle-flame . . . but he was only one of thousands. I think we shall never look at the blue sky again without thinking of them . . . the lords of the air."

To his amazement he saw that her eyes were filled with tears. He had not thought her capable of so much feeling, she who was so cool, secretive, self-possessed.

"What happened? Tell me."

"It was only a few days after he went back from leave. He went out on reconnaissance and never came back. Several days later some R.E.'s found him. The plane had crashed in a clearing in a forest in Belgium; it was burnt out. Hubert had been thrown clear—what was left of him. His things were strewn around. He had a little Scottie dog made of solid glass, his 'Saint Christopher' who always went with him. They sent it back to me. He was buried there, where they found him."

"Would you, some day, want to go and discover his grave?"

"No. Not for anything."

"I wouldn't, in your place."

She pulled blades of grass and laid them on her knee in a pattern.

"It's hard to explain, Bagpipes, how I feel about Hubert. When you've known anyone so short a time, and your married life has only been a matter of a few short weeks on his leaves . . . it becomes as though it had never been. It fades out. You could have dreamed it all. Perhaps I'm very shallow to feel like this after fifteen months. Hubert is much more real to his sister Barbara, who adores his memory."

"That's understandable."

She looked at him searchingly.

"Is it? . . . It is something my mother-in-law could never understand."

He smiled at her.

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"You're a complex type. Lady Lusca'y isn't used to complex types."

"Indeed, she isn't! And she'll never want to meet another one, after me. I do see her point of view. But, Bagpipes, can I go on for ever like this, when all my pleasures have to be stolen ones?"

He had no answer to her. Turning on one elbow he burrowed with a finger in the roots of the grass.

"Listen!" he said. "Clatter, clatter, clatter, like an infinitesimal fairy threshing machine."

"Grasshoppers. You should have heard them in France."

He stopped poking and slid a glance at her.

"You don't like talking about France, do you?"

He heard her let out her breath.

"What happened in France that was so shocking?" he asked.

"Shocking?"

"The wrong word, perhaps?"

She fumbled with small items in her handbag, fingering a lip-stick holder, mirror, purse.

"I can't find any matches."

"Here." He threw across a lighter. "You have to humour it; the flint's worn down."

She lit a cigarette and handed him the packet and the lighter.

"It's just that I don't like the Jon of the Paris days any more."

"What was wrong with her—the Jon of the Paris days?"

"She was rapacious, conscienceless; an opportunist."

"She was young to be all those unpleasant things."

"She was never very young. She grew up when she was quite a child; she was calculating, and utterly self-centred."

"This is character reading with the lid off!"

"Laughable, isn't it?"

"Hardly, with a voice as bitter as yours."

"Was it bitter?"

"Life under the Germans must have been the very devil."

"Oh, we got by, Mummy and I. We had friends at the top."

"At the top of where?"

"On the German General Staff in Paris. The von Perlbergs. They saw we never went without anything. Parcels of food . . . butter, chickens . . . came round to our flat after dark. We lived like—like queens of song. When our good neighbours came in we pushed the evidence into a locked cupboard and played at being loyal Frenchwomen. It was a great game while it lasted. We used to go to parties at the von Perlberg's flat in the Rue

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Cambon. We used to pretend to the neighbours that we were going to see a sick friend, sneaking out in our old clothes with our lovely ones in a suit-case, and dress when we got there. Frau von Perlberg understood. It made her giggle. We thought it was fun, too."

"And when you excused yourself to yourself?"

"Yes, I did that, too, Bagpipes. Your perception again. Mummy would say that art was international, that she didn't recognise nationalities or wars. Her friends were her friends. She had made friends with the von Perlbergs on a concert tour in Germany. So we got the best of both worlds. And the funny part of it was that Mummy always called herself a loyal Frenchwoman. She had friends in the resistance movement, too; people in our own house. They used to say, 'Look at that wonderful Madame Anny Bisset, a great artist, hungry and proud like the rest of us. There's the spirit of France for you.' We did at least shiver loyally; you couldn't very well have bags of coal delivered in a laundry basket by Colonel-General von Perlberg's servant."

"That's why your memories of France are black?"

"Partly that. Mummy sang at Nazi receptions at the Ritz, and I played her accompaniments. Again, singing was international. She sang because it was her life to sing. She didn't mind whom she sang to. Do you think she should have minded?"

"Obviously she should have been dumb for France."

The cigarette burned down to Joanna's lip, and she started and threw it away.

"Quite a something to look back on, isn't it? Something that can never be wiped out. Two comfortable traitors without a conscience between them. So clever, so very clever."

"It's all over, Jon, and 'traitor' is an intolerant word."

"But it's the attitude of mind which is so revealing. We—no, I; let's leave Mummy out of it—I hadn't the guts, I couldn't take it. Our friends were so fine, so brave. They held up their heads and suffered. As soon as I got hungry I thought, this won't do for wonderful Jon. And I went whimpering to Frau von Perlberg, and after that I wasn't hungry any more. Despicable, wasn't it?"

He looked down at the green grass.

"Certainly not the stuff that martyrs are made of."

"Thanks, Bagpipes," she said huskily. "I don't want approval."

"Is this what you've been saving up against yourself all these months?"

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"Isn't it enough?"

"I wouldn't know."

She said suddenly, "You know, Hubert would have loathed it. He'd never have forgiven me. He was like that; a very sharply defined line between what is done and what isn't done. And trading with the enemy in war-time isn't done. Of course, he never knew; he never would have been told. I couldn't talk to Hubert about myself like I talk to you. Come to think of it, I've put myself and my reputation very much in your hands. How you could blackmail me now!"

"Blackmail isn't one of my specialities. I wouldn't know how to begin," he said with kindly reassurance.

"You're a grand person."

"You're an odd mixture, Jon!"

"God! Don't I know it," she said with sudden passion. "You don't know what it's like to have such a tangled mind. And I don't belong anywhere—I don't belong in any world."

There was a wounded sound in her voice which, for the first time since he had known her, convinced him that she was a sincere and honest person.

"Darest thou, O my soul, walk out with me toward the unknown region, where neither ground is for the feet, nor any path to follow," he quoted, rather haltingly.

"I never have dared anything," she said. "It sounds so bleak, that question, unless you are brave and have a soul you can trust."

He suddenly covered her hand with his as it lay on the grass.

"You're all right, Jon. You made a failure of one life; make a success of another."

"Haven't I tried? It's such a frightful strain."

"That's up to you. I can't work it out for you."

She shook her head.

"Don't worry about me. I don't know how we got talking like this when we came out to enjoy ourselves. You must be thinking, curse this woman and her introspections. I don't blame you a bit. I should be a fool to expect anyone—even you—to believe in me after all that has happened."

"Now, you're being unnecessarily hard on yourself."

"I couldn't be! I couldn't be!"

"All this over a few pounds of butter and some chickens?"

"Champagne, eggs, white bread, and caviare. Put them all down. No, it was worse than that, Bagpipes; worse, worse than you'll ever know."

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He picked up her jacket and held it out to her.

"Don't go on, Jon. You're in an expansive mood, and it's dangerous. I don't want you to hate me to-morrow because you confided in me to-day. It's a common psychological reaction."

She began to put on her jacket.

"Protecting me from myself? Thanks. That's what I call being a friend."

"Come along. I know a nice little roadside hotel about a mile from here where we can get tea."

The *Stage-coach Inn* turned out to be modern Tudor, complete with oak beams, brasses, and wall motifs of roses, arches, and coats of arms. Fortunately it was also modern in its comfort. The lounge had deep leather chairs and small oak tables; there were pottery jars full of blue and pink lupins, and a hidden radio breathed out a nostalgic Ivor Novello waltz.

The tea and toast were hot, the jam home-made, the milk adequate in quantity and more creamy than blue. The only other occupants of the lounge were a party of two minks and a silver fox, sharing one double-breasted gentleman and a parked Rolls headed towards the coast.

Jon smiled.

"What a collection of places where we've eaten together."

"Must be because we met over a table. 'We've got the habit.'"

"I shall never get over the chancy way we did meet. I mean, if Esther hadn't messed up the 'phone message and they had actually reserved a private room for me——"

"I hadn't heard about that."

"Oh, yes. It was only because of a muddle that I was in the public dining-room at all. And when you think of all the other hotels I might have chosen!"

He offered his usual rather crushed cigarette packet.

"Come to think of it, everything in your life happens by the merest thread of a chance. Hubert dropping out of the sky into *your* field. The minister who saw my drawings having a brother who was principal of the Glasgow Art School. Out of all the fields in Brittany and all the ministers in Scotland."

Her eyes roved round the room.

"How anybody can wear a fur coat on a day like this——!"

"Something in the city going down to Brighton for the week-end."

"But three of them!"

"Don't be jealous. Could you squeeze another half cup out of that pot?"

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"I'll ask for some more hot water. The waitress was less hostile than most."

He paid the bill, and they went out into the Tudor hall. In a display cabinet was a little painted china ash-tray made in the shape of the hotel with *Stage-coach Inn* in gold letters on a tiny sign.

"Oh, look, Bagpipes. I wonder if it's for sale? I would love to have it."

"Would you?" He asked the smart, elderly woman at the reception desk, "Is this ash-tray for sale? We should like to buy it."

"Well, sir, it's just a sample. We take orders for them. We sell ever such a lot. They're ten-and-six each."

"Please get me one," said Joanna, going to the desk. "Will you send it to me if I leave the money now?"

"Certainly, madam."

The receptionist found a sheet of paper, a pen and some pink blotting-paper.

"Your name, please?"

Joanna who was delving into her bag for her purse did not reply at once.

"Your name, madam. Your name!" She was rather an impatient receptionist.

But still Joanna was not replying. She stood there dumbly, her eyes darkening with some curious hesitancy. Her cheeks had paled. Suddenly the black pigskin handbag slipped from her fingers and small articles were strewn over the floor.

"Oh, what a clumsy fool I am!"

Her voice was full of pain and dismay.

Suddenly everything was gathered up and the bag re-packed and pushed into her hands.

"It's all right. I've given my name and address and paid for the thing. Come on, Jon."

He led her out into the sunlight of the gravel sweep where the car stood.

"Sorry, Jon. It was frightfully embarrassing for you, being called on to give your name and all that. I should have thought."

She looked at him in a dazed way.

"But it wasn't that . . . it wasn't that, at all."

"How do you mean, it wasn't that? You didn't want them to know who you were, did you?"

"I didn't even think of it. I—oh, nothing."

She got into the car and sat looking straight before her while

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he started it and turned into the main road. Her hands on her lap were desperately twisting and pulling, as though to rid themselves of fetters. He was horrified at the whiteness of her face and the shadowed remoteness of her eyes.

"Jon, what on earth's the matter? What happened?"

"Something she said. Did you hear what she said?"

"She only asked you your name."

"That was it. Like striking a gong . . . and then the curtain goes up for a minute."

"What are you saying?"

She looked at him imploringly.

"Bagpipes . . . turn into a side turning. Please. Off the road and then stop."

He saw where two elm trees guarded the entrance to a narrow winding lane. Round the first bend he drew the car up on a grass verge.

"Now. What's all this about?"

She spanned her forehead with her hand, pressing thumb and little finger on her temples.

"Just a memory. When she said, 'Your name!' I knew—I knew where I'd heard it before."

"I can't think of anything that should have upset you like that."

He separated her restless hands, taking one into his.

"Look at me."

Reluctantly she turned, afraid to meet a piercing, critical gaze. Instead she saw in his eyes a deep and tender sincerity.

She lifted her one free hand in a hopeless gesture, the struggle in her face was lost as her eyes welled with tears; she turned, and was clasped in his arms.

III

I

(1942.—Le Crisel . . . the rocks and the beach, with the silver-topped breakers curling along the hard fawn-coloured sand ; sunshine, even in late autumn, baking the red rocks, and the children climbing up, dangling wet bathing suits, scarlet, yellow, and blue.

Le Crisel . . . a white house with blue shutters and tangled hydrangeas rioting all over the garden . . . the pingle-bingle of the schoolroom piano as some unfortunate child practised her Czerny . . . the laughter and bustle of the common-room . . . Goldie suddenly appearing on the verandah, holding up her watch and shaking it, with that Mad Hatter's trick of hers. And in the background, just out of the picture, Joanna—poor lost Joanna, with her memories of the only place where she was ever really happy.)

“YOUR name ?”

“Joanna Lewalter.”

“Nationality ?”

“British.”

“Occupation ?”

“None in particular.”

“Address ?”

“I am staying at the Villa Cosette.”

“The English school ?”

“Yes. I am making a short visit there.”

“Your papers ?”

“Here. They are quite in order ; in fact you examined them yourself when I went on the train this morning.”

“You gain nothing by impatience, Mademoiselle.”

“So it would seem.”

Five minutes later she stepped out of the station entrance into the full sunlight of the square, a striking and very cross-looking girl in fashionable Paris clothes ; a tailored dress of fine navy-blue wool, exquisite shoes and stockings, silver fox slung over shoulder,

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white bag and gloves, ridiculous little white hat perched on sleek dark hair. Not a taxi, not a four-wheel cab, not an ancient *fiacre* or even a sedan chair; just dull, provincial, stupid Le Crisel in war-time, with its plane trees and its fly-blown cafés and its deserted newspaper kiosk. *Défense de fumer*, too, in that slow and smelly train; a *défense* barely tolerated by the English-French daughter of Gavin Lewalter and Anny Bisset, both very free souls. Out came a slender gold case, and Miss Lewalter lit up in the public street under the disapproving gaze of two nuns, scuttling towards Saint Étienne's.

It was only twenty minutes' walk after all to Villa Cosette, and very soon she had left the town and fresh salt breezes from the sea refreshed her as she climbed the hill. She reached the headland and paused to rest. Below, the cool green breakers, snow-crested, wooed the tawny sand of a long beach; the beauty of the afternoon pleased her, and with a sigh the heat of the day and her exasperation slipped from her.

Up the rocks the girls were climbing; every afternoon at this time they would run down to the beach for a blow before darkness fell; twenty girls or so, with wind-tossed hair, bare legs, and coloured frocks climbing the rocks in a chatter of voices and laughter; big girls helping small girls, every now and then a shriek as a flying leap was accomplished. They made as much noise as a flight of rooks going to their nests in the sunset.

Joanna went on and reached the house; and there was Miss Golding—Goldie—out on the verandah looking for her, holding up her watch to her ear and shaking it, with that Mad Hatter's trick of hers that made everybody laugh.

"Hallo, Jon! I'm terribly glad to see you, *and* relieved. . . . Was everything all right?"

"Perfectly all right; but that awful train——! One hour and fifty minutes for a fifteen mile journey coming back; no smoking; and reeking with garlic and the great unwashed. It wasn't so bad going this morning; cooler, I suppose."

"Go and change before you tell me; you must be hot and weary."

"Don't be so self-sacrificing, Goldie! Anyway, I'm too tired to change. Let me sink into something that looks like a divan . . . that's better. My feet!"

"I've no sympathy with your feet. Cinderella slippers with four inch heels!"

"My shoes are utterly comfortable; I should feel like death in those clumping brogues of yours. The girls are coming up the rocks."

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"All right. Miss Little is in ; she'll give them their supper."

Joanna took off her hat and lifted the hair that clung damply to her brow.

"Much better, I feel ; much, much better, dear Goldie. They were perfectly polite, but hellish, if you know what I mean."

"They didn't stop you from going to Bonsatour, or anything like that ?"

"They did not. They merely asked me a string of ridiculous questions—like engaging a cook—and made me show them my papers ; and when I came back to-night they asked me all the same questions all over again, and I nearly boiled up with sardonic humour, but I refrained. Note that, Goldie ; Joanna refrained."

"Did they ask you what you were doing here, at Villa Cosette ?"

"Don't be so dramatic. Of course they did, and I told them I was paying a little visit to an old school mistress of mine. They didn't bother any more about that."

"Here's Marcel with a cup of tea for you."

Marcel, small and eager husband of the cook, came in behind his large moustaches and a small tea tray.

"*Merci bien*, Marcel," said Joanna, "I was dying for this."

"Mademoiselle must not die," said Marcel, "for the tea is almost done. Soon it will be coffee only."

"'Coffee' is good ; acorns and sand, you mean."

Joanna lay back, sipping her tea luxuriously while Miss Golding, a deep frown between her brows gazed out of the window. Tall, angular, and about forty years old, she wore the garb of the typical English schoolmistress despite the gentle Mediterranean climate ; dark blue skirt, white shirt blouse, and sagging grey cardigan into the pockets of which her fists were usually thrust ; lisle stockings and black buttoned ward shoes. Her face was long and fresh-coloured, her eyes blue, mild, and puzzled ; her hair, of that fair, floppy fineness which refuses to be "set," strayed in loose ends from its confining knot.

"Here come the girls."

"And there goes Little's ancestral voice prophesying war. Why does she always have to shout like a megaphone ?"

"She does her work faithfully. You and I would be badly off without her, Jon, since Miss Fortescue has left us."

"Oh, yes. I do wonder what has happened to Dandy Fortescue ?"

"I keep on thinking of her," said Miss Golding ; "I suppose

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she was rather a fool to run off like that, and imagine she could get away. Nobody can get away really; I'm glad I never tried—with the girls."

"I should think you are. Remember those coal boats at Cannes? Hideous! But all the same, I shall back our Dandy to get through."

"She said she would walk to Marseilles, steal a rowing boat, and row by easy stages to Gibraltar."

"Easy stages is good. She didn't say that? Oh, cheers for our Dandy, your dear ex-arithmetic mistress! Actually I pity any German sergeant who tries to tackle her, with that Roedean hockey swing of hers." Joanna swept back her hair and reached a long arm for her cigarette case.

"Jon, you just don't care a hoot what happens to Fortescue, do you? You don't care a hoot for anybody."

"Yes, I do; I care two hoots for you, and three hoots for Mummy in Paris. Don't tell me *you* are worrying about that fool of a Dandy?"

"I can't help it; she was my colleague. She's part of my life, like every child here."

"Oh Goldie, Goldie, you soft-hearted idiot. Life isn't worth living if you put yourself into a constant state of misery over other people's troubles. Every man for himself, that's my principle."

"Joanna the Great making herself out to be worse than she is. You're not the right type to be tough, Jon."

"You'd be surprised how tough I can be. And now for my day, as Mrs. Roosevelt would say. . . ."

Miss Golding hooked a chair and drew it close to Joanna.

"Tell me about the Boltons; are they all right?"

"They've gone."

"What!"

"Ssh . . . listen. I got to Bonsatour about ten-thirty; and not wanting to give the impression that I'd gone for any particular purpose, I strolled along the shops, and then sat down at that depressing little café at the end of the main street—you know—and had a coffee that wasn't a coffee. At last I wandered along to the Rue Ste. Marie. I didn't go up to the house, of course—one doesn't in these days—but I sat down in the Jardin Publique opposite and went into a coma for about ten minutes, just in case I was being watched. When I did look across at the villa I could see at once that it was empty; the garden was full of dirty paper and rubbish that had blown in. Mrs. Bolton would never have allowed that! I went away, and walked about for an hour;

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then I strolled back and re-passed the villa. By sheer luck a woman was coming out of the gate; a charwoman, I suppose, who had been back to see if there was anything left worth picking up. I followed her nearly to her home, and then asked her if she could tell me where the Boltons had gone. She said she didn't know."

"Did she mean she didn't *know*, or——"

"Wait for it. I gave her twenty francs, and she still didn't know. Then I gave her fifty francs, and she admitted that 'They' had called on Mr. Bolton last Friday. She wouldn't say another word."

"Interned! Oh, poor Mrs. Bolton—if they've carted them off to Germany."

"Now, Goldie, don't go tearing another chunk of your heart out over the Boltons. They've gone, and that's all there is to it. It's just war, and you take your chance; either you're lucky or unlucky. It's a game. You play your own hand, and you don't scream if you lose. You certainly don't scream if the other fellow loses."

"It was terribly brave of you to go, Jon, just to please me. I'd have gone myself, but I daren't take risks when the children depend upon me—twenty-three of them."

"I can't imagine why their parents didn't take them away when the war began."

"Many of them did. I had fifty-two girls when the war began. But many of the parents thought it would be perfectly safe here—as we all did—and even less unsettling to the children than in England; and some of the parents are in India."

"Well, they can't hold you responsible, seeing how things have turned out."

"But I am responsible, Jon; before God and my country."

"You'll be saying next that you're responsible for Fortescue."

"I brought her out here . . . and she was a good type of girl."

"So darned good that she up and ran the minute she found out that unoccupied France wasn't unoccupied any more."

"Don't judge, Jon."

"My dear Goldie, your habit of always looking for the best in people is going to put you in an awful spot some day. Dandy was a wash-out; I'm a wash-out; and Little may become a wash-out at any moment . . . good lord, I've left my lip-stick somewhere . . . I can't find it . . . my last Coty!"

"I'm going to look in at the girls' supper. Coming?"

Our Dreaming Done

In the refectory across the white-painted hall, twenty-three children were at their supper of crisp rolls, butter, and milk in blue beakers. Their ages ranged from eight to fifteen years; from Diana Clearmoon, a black-eyed imp, poet and baby of the school, to Paddy Bevis, with her heavy auburn curls tied back in a severe manner as befitted the dignity of a Head Girl. Paddy's parents were in India and she was the eldest of a large family; Diana was the motherless only child of a Wing Commander in the Royal Air Force.

All the girls looked up gaily as the door opened.

"Hallo, Miss Joanna!"

"Did you have a nice journey, Miss Joanna?"

"Miss Joanna, did you see any Germans?"

"Straight to bed, girls," said Miss Golding; "Miss Little, they're ten minutes late. See that lights are out at eight prompt."

Joanna, light of heart as of foot, raced upstairs ahead of the girls, and diving into her room flung hat and bag on the bed, fur and gloves on a chair, and all in one movement began to unfasten her dress. Soon she was in the adjoining bathroom, hair pinned on top of her head, revelling in the deliciousness of warm water scented with her own Paris toilet-cologne, her charming voice uplifted singing a Mozart air.

She dressed in fresh silken clothes, to suit her fastidiousness, brushed out her sweep of dark hair, and put on a dress of white chiffon patterned in dark red. Garnet ear-rings and lip-stick to match completed the picture. Joanna Lewalter dressed not for her company but to please herself; if she had been on a desert island she would have taken equal care. It was all part of the picture; the Great Joanna; wonderful Jon.

She came downstairs to find supper laid for herself and Miss Golding in the study, Miss Little having retired to bed with one of her frequent migraines. The cooling air was still, and heavy with the autumn scents of the garden; the sky was of a clear dark blue with purple clouds floating near the west.

"I must show you Diana's latest poem," said Miss Golding. "She left it in her history exercise book. Listen, I'll read it. The title is 'O'er the Lagoon' . . .

" 'Tell me not it is morning,
The sun so high at noon,
For I am in my golden childhood,
Gliding o'er the lagoon

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“ ‘The water lily tightly folded
In the heat of afternoon;
My love and I, mouth on mouth,
Gliding o’er the lagoon.

“ ‘Night comes, alone I am crying,
No lily, no love, no moon;
An old man without even a dream
Gliding o’er the lagoon.’

. . . What do you think of that for eight years old ? ”

Joanna laughed aloud.

“Goldie, your pride in the accomplishments of your flock is pathetic. If I had a child of eight years old with ideas like that I’d take her to a psychiatrist. Where does she get it from, the precocious little horror? ‘Golden childhood’! And ‘mouth on mouth’—*mon Dieu*!—‘mouth on mouth.’ And what does she know about old men without even a dream, or old women if it comes to that ? ”

“She was allowed to read all kind of unsuitable books before she came here. Her father’s a British flyer, and her mother died when she was a baby. She was brought up by two old-fashioned grandparents who talked to her and treated her as though she were forty years old. Her grandfather was a Milton enthusiast and she knows pages of ‘Paradise Lost’ off by heart.”

Marcel brought in the silver tray with its graceful coffee pot and the delicate old cups which Miss Golding had discovered at a sale at Avignon.

“Let’s take our coffee to the window, Jon, and put the light out so we can pull back the curtains. The sky is lovely to-night. I never drew the curtains when there was no black-out. Oh dear, how long—how long ! ”

Joanna lay back luxuriously in the long Madeira-work cane chair.

“ ‘Paradise Lost’ . . . I suppose that’s where your precious Diana gets her theological ideas. And personally I do prefer her scriptural efforts . . . rather sweet and naïve. That one about Abraham . . .

“ ‘A little thrush
Nested in a bush.
Abraham had no desire
To set the bush on fire,
But God said, Behold the burning bush.
I wonder what happened to the thrush ? ’ ”

Our Dreaming Done

"I don't much care for that 'bush' and 'thrush' rhyme of hers," said Miss Golding lightly. "Or perhaps one is intended to pronounce them as 'boosh' and 'throosh'."

Joanna stretched her arms and sighed happily.

"It's a magic evening . . . so still. I haven't heard a sound for ages."

Miss Golding put a puzzled hand to her forehead.

"Neither have I—and it's past eight o'clock. The convent bell should be ringing."

She looked questioningly at Joanna, who shrugged her shoulders and said gaily, "We'll have to expect things to be different. Perhaps 'They' don't care for convent bells."

"Jon, I wonder what it will be like here—under the Germans? Of course, you've known what it's like already, in Paris."

"Paris is different. Actually it didn't affect Mummy and me much; except that the food was fading away and we were beginning to have to line up for everything."

"Of course your mother would be privileged, wouldn't she? She had an international reputation as a singer; she was as well known in Germany as in France and England."

"I can't say we were privileged; we weren't interfered with, but neither were most ordinary citizens unless they were political types or too talkative. It won't make any difference to you here, Goldie; don't worry."

"Won't make any difference! An English school and an English teacher!"

"Your influence is limited; you can't do any harm. Here we are and here we stay. We'll be all right, you'll see."

"Jon, you don't know how much good that 'we' does me. Every night when I say my prayers I thank God that you came to be here at this time. To think that you should associate yourself with me and the school—stand shoulder to shoulder with me. . . . Jon, your gaiety and strength are inspiring; you have such *grand* qualities for times like these. I'm over-serious, prosaic, heavy in the hand. I feel—I *know* that so long as you are here with me nothing can go far wrong."

"Oh, Goldie, Goldie! What touching faith. Don't be so intense, darling. I'm not strong or inspiring; it's just that I don't care. Debonair and devil-may-care, that's Joanna, that's Jon. Have a cigarette?"

"Thanks . . . heaven knows you can't accuse me of sentimentality, but I shan't forget that 'we.' I was thinking while you were upstairs of that day fifteen years ago when I walked into the

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third-form room at Inglewood School and you were sitting there at your desk in the front row. I thought, what an attractive child . . . your face had that look of being lighted from inside. I little knew that one day we should become such friends, that one day you would become a rock to me."

"Goldie, that's sweet of you," said Joanna, suddenly touched; "only I'm not much good really; I think about myself too much, even Mummy says that. It's this Joanna the Great business—a sort of pose, and yet it gives me a 'nothing can happen to me' feeling which is silly yet comforting in these days. I get a topped-up feeling, Goldie—that's what you mistake for strength, I'm afraid. Basically I daresay that Little is a good deal more reliable."

"She's loyal, but she flutters a bit, poor Miss Little."

"I wonder she didn't want to escape with Fortescue."

"Oh, she wouldn't take the risk. She never takes risks, that's partly what's the matter with her. Now stop criticising her; I dislike criticising anybody because I know there is so much they could pick at in me."

Joanna traced a pattern with her finger-tips on the veranda ledge.

"You ought to try and take things more lightly, Goldie. These girls—it was up to their parents to have got them out. Some of them must have had friends or business connections in Germany; they could have pulled strings. I know that heaps of English people pulled strings and got away."

"But I don't think my twenty-three children had a 'string' of that sort between them," said Miss Golding dryly: "come to that, haven't you influential German friends of your own? Could they be induced to help?"

Joanna felt a slight heat rise in her cool cheeks.

"If you mean the von Perlbergs," she said, "they are not really friends but just acquaintances of Mummie's. When she had that season in Berlin they used to go to all her concerts, they were so keen on her singing, and they took her to their country place near Munich for a week's holiday after the tour. They have always been very polite and nice to us, but we don't know them well enough to ask for such favours—especially now. Mummy says it turns her up, practising the unaccustomed virtue of tactfulness with the von Perlings—you know what Mummy is, the original rusher-in-where-angels-fear."

"Oh, that's all right, Jon; I wasn't expecting anything."

"But," went on Joanna hotly, "you're not getting any money

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for the girls ; you're keeping this place going out of your own savings. That's a rotten deal for you, Goldie."

"When I bring them safely through I shall be repaid," said the schoolmistress quietly ; "we won't discuss that subject. What I do want to thank you for, Jon, is the way you've stepped into the breach with these sewing lessons, and the class-singing. The children love them, they keep the school happy and fill up the time-table that Miss Fortescue left so vacant."

Joanna laughed. "They certainly don't seem to be sorrowing over their lost arithmetic. Some of them have quite good voices . . . that little Angela, though she's such a fidgety devil I could bite her ears, can sing a clear B in alt. And now I'm going up if you don't mind. It was a wearing sort of day, and I want to write in my diary. 'Night, and chin up, Goldie !"

"Bless you, Jon."

III

MY DARLING MUMMY,

I expect you have been wondering what has happened to me now that the new régime is here—the New Order, I should say. Well, everything is quite all right, divinely peaceful ; Jon has just had a lovely fish supper with Goldie on the veranda and is full of mullet and good intentions ! I have been out for the day, to Bonsatour along the coast, and everything was just as pretty as Baby's picture-book, though they do keep asking you your name and address every five minutes, it's just a habit and doesn't do anybody any harm ! Now, Mummy my dear, you mustn't worry, because I like it here and intend to stay a little longer ; there is nothing at all to worry about and I am convinced, though Goldie flutters a bit, that nothing can happen to us. (I wouldn't suggest staying if I thought there was anything stormy in the offing ; Jon looks after herself too well for that, as you know.) I'm no heroine, Mummy ; neither the French nor the English side of me, so when I say Okay you can bet it's okay. Nobody is going to bother about a harmless English school and a handful of kids, though I wouldn't hurt Goldie's feelings by insinuating that she is unimportant to the Third Reich. She is the heroic type and would die for her country as easy as kiss-my-hand, not that she'll ever be called on to do so. I'm terribly fond of old Goldie, and she does want me here ; she thinks I really am Joanna the Great, which is flattering to one whom her own Mummy would so readily debunk ! You ought to have debunked me more when I was a child, darling.

I'm having a most amusing time teaching—yes, teaching !—the children class-singing and drawing. Can you imagine me teaching

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anything to anybody? I can think of the horror with which you will picture me completely ruining twenty-three potential "voices." There's no bel canto about it, darling, we just sing in our natural exuberance, and I'm sure that never hurt anybody. We sing out of a book called "One Hundred Songs for Child Voices," can you think of anything more innocent?

Alternatively we take our sketch-blocks and paints and sit on the rocks making the most amazing daubs. I find my talent has developed, and I have quite a Van Gogh touch, the girls think I am marvellous and you know how sweet-natured I am to people who think me marvellous. You will wonder why I have thus taken up the scholastic profession. Well, we had a bit of real drama last week. Molto agitato. The Maths. teacher here, a truly hearty type called Fortescue, suddenly decided to Make a Bolt for It. Mad, of course, and I suppose I shouldn't be putting this in a letter, only it will amuse you and can't hurt her as nobody knows where she has got to by now. With ten pounds in her pocket and some good strong shoes on her feet she left us in a hurry, floods of tears, the middle of the night, and a farm cart. Since when not even a picture postcard. The things we do for England!

I hope you are looking after yourself, darling, and singing through your scores; I'm sure you will need them again. You and I have always got by, Mummy. I suppose that's what Goldie feels when she thinks I give her moral support. Don't smile. Goldie who sees the best in everybody actually sees moral support in the gay inconsequential chatter of Joanna Lewalter. Hallucination, did you say? Oh Mummy, how well you know me.

Do you know, I think I must be psychic. As I was coming in the train from Bonatour, in a crowded carriage full of very hot, cross people, I suddenly heard your beautiful voice singing "Bois épais." I did, I swear I did. I wasn't actually thinking of you at the time, just looking out of the window at the dusty olives, and that magic sweetness came to me, like wine, like a silver shaft of moonlight. I know you were singing it somewhere at that moment; the rich, soothing opening . . . and then that professional trick of a golden sob in the throat when you get to "je sens une désespoir dont l'horreur est profonde." When the song was over I gave a little clap and said "Bis! Bis!" and everybody in the carriage thought I had gone mad. Now I have told you of this sensational experience, I have remembered that time at Antibes when you sang on the rocks one night in the moonlight, just like Scylla or Charybdis, or is that another classical allusion gone wrong?

Nothing can spoil the Côte d'Azur, Mummy; it belongs to time

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and eternity ; it is indestructible, it " vibrates in the memory." I love that phrase, it means to me music and all the ecstatic moments when I was lifted up above myself. They " vibrate " in my memory. Do you remember the evening we stood outside a plain little villa on a dusty road in Brittany and heard somebody playing the César Franck piano variations so beautifully we couldn't believe anything so lovely was true. You said then that I ought to learn the beauty of humility and I didn't agree !

I don't agree now. I love my pride and hug it to me. I love to walk with my head higher than the rest ; to be so full of my own personality that I'm riding the crest of the wave all the time. I should hate to die while there is still any beauty in the world I haven't seen, or felt, or held in my hands. You said once that you didn't understand me when I said that other people were never so real to me as myself. I always find it hard to imagine that other people feel or understand or desire or merely exist with half the intensity of my own nature. But I wouldn't have it different ; I love being myself. How tired you will be of reading this ; " just Jon, full of herself as usual " you will say.

Mummy, I have made a charming collection for you, a leaf or a flower from all the places you remember best, and I have written the names on tiny parchment labels with a verse of poetry, too. I didn't mean to tell you yet, but I couldn't resist. I'm afraid that from now I shan't be able to travel about at my sweet will ; it puts an end to my collection, and I did so want to go over to Etze and get a flower from the Salvy garden where we did " Véronique " for fun and the French orphans ! When you get my little collection you will have so many " vibrating " memories in one box that every time you open the lid the colour and light and perfume will flood the room where you're sitting. We love looking back, don't we ? Oh, Mummy, beautiful 1939 before all this began ! Will it ever come back, that heavenly world we loved ? It was the only possible world for people like you and me, who hate violence and sacrifices and austerity and heroics and doing the things which are expected of us. But enough of that !

I am doing the best I can for my face—with difficulty—so if by anything from wheedling to plain murder you can get hold of any of my cosmetics or perfume—you know the ones—seize them for me. I've got plenty of clothes here, and the exercise or the teaching or the rusticity, or the worry of my present predicament (joke !) has taken nearly an inch off my waistline so everything fits beautifully. You know I don't worry ; it's so much easier to run away. Thank you, Mummy, for passing this bit of philosophy on to me when I was young and impressionable.

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Well, you should see me yawning ! It is bed-time and the owls are hooting, so I shall say good night, lay my lovely head on the pillow, and fall straight into my usual dreamless slumber.

Good-night, Mummy.

Your loving Jon.

Joanna slept so dreamlessly and deeply that when she woke in the early morning she found that she couldn't sleep any more. It was only six o'clock, and a pearly, softly-misted morning, windless and inviting.

She sat up in bed, and gathering up the sheets of her letter read it through critically. Why did letters written the night before always seem so revolting when read over next morning? However it was too much trouble to write another one, and anyway Mummy always understood.

She folded the sheets, put them into an envelope, and addressed it to : "Madame Anny Bisset, Place du Parc 92, Avenue d'Étoile, Paris." She put a stamp on the letter, and then placed it inside a grey official envelope which she sealed and addressed to : "Colonel-General v. Perlberg, Hotel Lamartine, Rue Quatorze-Juillet, Paris." This packet she put away in her handbag, to post in the town later in the day. You couldn't explain everything to Goldie, and it was very decent of Colonel von Perlberg to allow her to use his office address and thus ensure that Mummy got her letters, safe and uncensored. Goldie might have turned intense over this little privilege, and called it trading with the enemy or some such grim name, so it was as well not to provoke a discussion.

The sea would be like grey silk this morning ; lovely, limpid, caressing water. What fun to have a solitary swim before anybody was about. She put on her black satin swimming suit and a wrap of scarlet towelling, and collected white rubber shoes and cap ; then sped to the kitchen.

"Good-morning, Simone. I thought I heard you moving. I couldn't sleep so I thought I'd go and swim. Now what about a nice big glass of orange juice with a maraschino cherry in the bottom ?"

"No more orange juice, mademoiselle. It is all gone."

"Oh damn, this stupid war ! But you're a liar, Simone. There are three bottles of orange juice in the pantry under the stairs ; I saw them yesterday."

"Madame said that those were to be kept in case any of the young ladies were ill."

Joanna made a face, and added, "And this is supposed to be an orange-growing district !"

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"The oranges are not ripe yet, mademoiselle. You know that."

"Well, I'll be back wanting lots of hot coffee in half an hour."

"*Bien*, mademoiselle," said the cook, adding under her breath, "*Espèce de coquine !*"

Joanna ran across the garden and out on the turfy hillside. Besides herself, only a few birds were out, looking for breakfast and too busy to chirp. Was she being too hearty? Would she pay for this all day, with a headache and snappiness of temper, on the laugh-before-seven-cry-before-eleven principle of childhood days? No going back now; look forward rather to that quick ecstatic dive, and the glow to follow, and the rich hot coffee which would taste so much more delicious to her than it would to any of the others.

She stopped at the top of the cliff, and looked down to the misted, wrinkled sea, grey with turquoise ripples, catching the light. The beach had suddenly become full of wire; great wheels of it, like giant cotton-spools, cluttered up the fresh sand. Wooden piles were being driven into the sea, as though to affront the shy curve of the incoming tide, and grey uniformed figures ran about busily; snatches of their harsh chatter punctuated by abrupt orders rose up on the quiet morning air.

Joanna shook with rage; she felt the muscles of her cheeks tighten furiously, and she could not control her mouth.

"The beasts. The hateful beasts! Damn them. Damn them!"

She turned and walked slowly back to the house, too listless and flat to run, frustrated, robbed of her swim. She was shivery now in her thin suit and wished she had stayed in bed.

She trailed upstairs, bathed and dressed, and at half-past seven went down to Miss Golding's study. The headmistress was sitting at her desk, busy with the details of housekeeping.

"Good morning, Goldie."

"Good morning, Jon. Listen, will you be an angel and take the whole school for singing at first period this morning? Then I'll be able to work out some sort of a time-table and get the place organised. There's a note here, delivered by hand, from that funny little man at the *boucherie*; I can't understand half of it, but I gather there isn't going to be any more meat."

"There hasn't been much for ages; we shan't notice the difference."

Miss Golding looked up, adjusting her glasses.

"Jon, how nice you look."

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"Just a tailored grey dress, but I like the scarlet turn-down collar and the bows myself. It's my morning to take school breakfast."

"Oh, you don't have to, Jon; it seems such a shame, but——"

"Of course I shall do it. I like to take my turn, and we don't want the children to miss *dear* Dandy too bitterly, do we? . . . Goldie——"

"What, Jon?"

"It's a blow; they've wired the bathing beach. I went down to swim this morning, and they were at it. Miles of horrible barbed wire all over everything, and a forest of piles in the sea. The devils! They've ruined everything."

"So it's good-bye to the beach and the bathing! What a loss—but I suppose it's all we can expect. Whatever will the children do? They'll be heartbroken. Oh, Jon, I hate to have to tell them; I hate this thing to come near them and hurt them. We've always tried not to talk about the war, but now. . . ."

"I'll tell them, Goldie; let me tell them at breakfast."

"Will you? Could you? Poor children, they've loved the beach so much."

"It's time they grew up and learned not to love anything much. I'll now go and ring the gong and do the thing properly. There shan't be any lamentations. What's a bathing beach more or less?"

The girls sitting round the two long tables looked approvingly at Joanna. There was nothing of the school mistress about this elegant girl, with her hair that was so carefully careless, her matched make-up which filled the older girls with wild envy, and her fascinating clothes such as film-stars wore. Miss Joanna was "different"; you never knew what she would do or say, and she never nagged or bossed; even if she told you to take your elbows off the table she would do it in such an amusing way. Sophisticated, that was the word. The whole school was in danger of being overwhelmed by a wave of sophistication.

"Listen, everybody . . . yes, I mean you, Eileen, if you can tear yourself away from Pamela's scintillating conversation for just a minute. Something has happened; something that you won't like, but when I tell you why it has happened you may see it in a different light. Keep your mouth shut, Felicity darling; nobody wants to make a pass at your teeth. Here it comes—the Germans have wired our beach. Our bathing beach. They've covered it with festoons of barbed wire, and driven stakes into the sea, and they haven't finished yet, so goodness knows what it will look

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like when they're through. I went down to swim this morning before breakfast, and I saw what they were doing, so I had to turn back."

"Miss Joanna! Do you mean we shan't be able to *bathe* any more?"

"Oh, Miss Joanna! You don't mean that?"

"You won't be able to bathe any more; you won't be able to go down to the beach any more. Be quiet! I've a lot more to say. You're in the middle of a war—all of you—and you're English girls and these Germans are your enemies."

"I'm Scottish!" howled Jean Angus, warm with Caledonian ire.

"All right. You're British, every one of you. I'm half English and half French, and I have to stay here and *watch* people messing my country about. Now why have the Germans spoiled our bathing beach with their wire and their what-nots? Because they're frightened. Because they know that some day the allied fleets and soldiers are coming to land somewhere on the shores of France, to set her free. They don't know where that landing may be, but it could be here, on our beach at Le Crisel. All the time these Germans are in a da—in a cold funk. They run about, wiring every beach in France, in Europe. People who are as frightened as that are despicable; you can laugh at them, quietly, behind their backs. Every time you look at our spoiled, wired beach, *laugh*—because all the wire in the world won't keep your sailors and soldiers out when the day comes. Every day the wire stays up brings us one day nearer to the hour when it will come down. You have a weapon; Pride. And another weapon; Scorn. Come to think of it, there are no better weapons to get you through your lives. I'm not talking to you as though you were children; you're not children to me. But if ever I hear one of you girls cry or make a song about the bathing beach, I shall utterly despise you." She flashed an imperious look over her rather stunned audience. "That's all I have to say. The first period will be class-singing with me, in the assembly room at nine-fifteen. Stand up, and dismiss quietly . . . what is it, Clare?"

Clare Clifford, whose whole school life was spent in a panic lest the correct thing should at any time be overlooked, panted out, "Miss Joanna, you've forgotten to return thanks!"

"So I have. I'm sorry . . . *Benedicto benedicatur*. Now hurry."

"Miss Joanna!"

"Who's that? Gwen? Is there anything you really want to know, Gwen?"

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"Miss Joanna, why can't we go down to the beach and bathe *between* the wire? That would play them for suckers, wouldn't it?"

Joanna withered the child with a look of derision.

"Do I have to tell you that the beach will also be *mined*, you little fool? And don't use imbecile Hollywood expressions."

The school retreated, crestfallen, and Joanna left to herself poured another cup of too-weak coffee and lit a cigarette. This was a restful moment and her own, while Goldie was haranguing the girls at prayers.

But here was Goldie, coming in in a hurry, prayer-book in hand.

"Did you tell them?" she asked earnestly. "They've gone into the hall looking pole-axed. How did you break the news?"

Joanna flicked ash on the floor and lifted her eyebrows.

"My dear Goldie. Do you expect me to believe that you weren't listening at the door?"

"Of course I was not. You know me too well to imagine such a thing."

"Well, I wish I was as high-minded as you. If it had been the other way round I should have been twisting my neck, trying to keep one ear to the keyhole and the other to the jamb."

"Whatever you said to them, Jon," said Miss Golding firmly, "I thank you. I must go to prayers. I'm late."

"Don't thank me; I only told them that the beach was mined and that death by explosion is a nasty end and leaves obnoxious fragments. Also that any comments from them would be met with heavy disapproval."

"Good for you."

"You'd better go, Goldie; Little has just come to the end of her playing-in voluntary and she's quite incapable of improvising. There will be a deathly hush . . . I told you so."

Ten minutes later the twenty-three girls, now the whole school, sat in their places self-consciously clutching their song-books and suppressing the chatter and mirth which came naturally to them the moment discipline was removed.

"The trouble with you," said Joanna, eyeing them coldly, "is that nobody ever taught you to breathe properly. Or to open your mouths. Stand up. For two minutes you shall do nothing but breathe; in through the nose, out through the mouth. Now . . . as deeply as you can . . . in . . . out . . . in . . . out."

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(Lord, thought Joanna, stifling her inward laughter, they look like a lot of frogs . . . they're going to burst . . . no they're not . . . yes they are!)

The school, scarlet-faced and nearly strangling itself, let out its united beath with a noise like a factory whistle. If that was breathing it was easier to live in a trance.

"Turn to page twenty-one," said Joanna; "'Strawberry Fair'. Listen to the introduction on the piano, and all start together if that isn't asking too much."

Getting off to a ragged start the school chanted exuberantly the saga of buttercups and daisies, getting several more "rifols" to a line than the poet intended.

"That," said Joanna, turning round from the piano as the final "tolde-riddle-ay" died away, "was horrible. Turn to number seventy-eight and see what you can do about that. This is a Scottish song, Jean, called 'Flow gently, sweet Afton' so try to look a little less aloof from our simple pleasures."

The first verse of the song flowed rather less gently than the river it commemorated, and at the close of it Hilda Leslie piped up, "Miss Joanna, what does it mean by 'thy Mary's asleep by the soft-flowing stream'?"

"It means what it says."

"But people don't sleep by *streams*."

"Mary had probably been out dancing all night, and was so shot up that she'd have slept on a doorstep. Have a little imagination, Hilda."

"Miss Fortescue said," put in Marjorie Grange smugly, "that it was a nice way of saying that Mary was dead."

"I'm not surprised to hear," said Joanna, "that Miss Fortescue's ideas were a bit on the morbid side. And why ask me when you already know? We'll leave that, and sing a really gay song—'The Golden Vanity,' if somebody can find the page."

"Oh, Miss Joanna! 'The Golden Vanity' isn't a gay song at all. It's about a poor little cabin-boy and the captain who——"

"You'll sing 'The Golden Vanity' and like it," Joanna insisted. "The music is gay if the words are not."

The school rendered "The Golden Vanity" with a tearful catch in its voice.

"Perhaps," said Joanna, "if you sing something of your own choice we may be a little more successful. Somebody choose, please, and don't *shout*."

Sheila Duffy's hand shot up. "Miss Joanna, can—can we sing 'Rule Britannia'?"

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The whole school broke into a chorus. "Oh yes, yes. Let's sing 'Rule Britannia'. We want to. Oh let us, Miss Joanna. Do let us sing 'Rule Britannia'."

(Of all the feeble, sentimental ideas. "Rule Britannia" from twenty-three weak and tuneless voices floating out of the windows of Villa Cosette, a schoolgirl's idea of defiance, a gesture that would be nothing short of a calamity.)

"Don't be ridiculous," snapped Joanna. "Sit down, Sheila, and stop waving your hand about. When you're all quiet we'll sing"—she opened the book at random—"we'll sing 'Golden Slumbers Kiss Your Eyes'." (Thank goodness for that harmless title.) "Now sing this with a little feeling, girls; you're not robots."

The school trailed its listless way through "Golden Slumbers".

"Miss Joanna," said Paddy Bevis, trying as Head Girl to retrieve the situation, "as there's five minutes more to go, would you sing to us?"

"Very well . . . I'll sing you 'Golden Slumbers' as it ought to be sung."

The girls looked disappointed, but listened politely to a technically flawless if slightly unsympathetic rendering of the piece they had previously mauled.

"That's all," said Joanna with some relief, jumping up from the piano. "The school will now divide. Eight to eleven years old will go to Miss Little for Latin in the small schoolroom; twelve and over to Miss Golding for English in the study."

"I'm eight years old," said Diana Clearmoon solemnly, "but I don't do Latin. Miss Fortescue used to take Doris and Mollie and me for reading while the others were doing Latin."

"You can go and listen to the Latin class," said Joanna firmly, repressing a kindly impulse to take the three youngest children into the garden and read to them. She wasn't feeling very fond of the girls this morning. Intensely sensitive to atmosphere, her serenity had suffered some undefined jar. It was a relief to escape to her room, to seize hat and book and hide herself in the depths of the garden. There the peaceful hush reassured her, and dropping her book she lay back, gazing at the blue sky through laced branches of trees.

IV

"Now, children," began Miss Little brightly, contemplating her docile flock of ten juniors; "we shall commence our Latin lesson by pretending we are a class of little Roman girls, greeting our teacher. I shall read out your names and you will answer me in the proper way. You all know what I mean, don't you?"

"Oh yes, Miss Little!" cried the juniors, with the exception of Diana Clearmoon who sat in stunned silence wondering whether there wasn't something sinister about this game.

"Very well then. I shall first give you Roman names, because we *must* enter into the spirit of the thing, must we not? Joyce, you can be Camilla; Margaret, you are Livia; Doreen, your name is Octavia; Jennifer——"

"I was Octavia before," piped Jennifer in obvious disappointment.

"Were you, dear? Then I think it would be nice for you to have a change. We will call you Vesta. Now what about Diana?"

"She could stop as she is, couldn't she, Miss Little?" cried Clare, flashing her intelligent spectacles; "there was a goddess Diana."

"That's clever of you, Clare dear; this Diana can stay as she is—just Diana."

The small namesake of the goddess, overwhelmed with relief, let out the breath she had been holding for two minutes.

The whole class having been re-named, the inquisition now began.

"Camilla!" called Miss Little, trying to look Roman.

"*Adsum!*" shouted Joyce triumphantly, knowing her stuff.

"Livia?"

"*Adsum.*"

"Octavia?"

"*Adsum.*"

It was coming nearer; Diana's dry tongue clove to the roof of her small mouth as the awful incantations went on. And now it was her turn . . . horror of horrors.

"Diana?" said Miss Little with a tolerant smile for the youngest girl in the school.

Diana's mouth opened feebly; she sat there dumb.

"Go on!" hissed Rosalie at her side; "go on, say it! Say '*adsum*'."

"Wh—what does it mean?" whispered Diana nervously.

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"It doesn't mean anything, you dope. You just say it."

"Stand up, Diana," said Miss Little patiently; "and kindly refrain, Rosalie, from giving gratuitous and probably erroneous information. Now, Diana dear, when your name is read out you must reply '*adsum*'."

Diana's small, dry tongue appeared at the corner of her mouth.

"Do you understand, dear?" said Miss Little with forced indulgence.

"Y-yes."

"Yes—what?"

"Yes . . . please."

"My name is Miss Little."

"Y-yes, please, Miss Little."

"Well, say it, child! Come along—come along, please!"

"*Ad . . . ad . . .*"

"*Adsum! Adsum!* A simple Latin word meaning 'I am present'."

"Oh, is that what it means?" said Diana in an interested voice. "*Adsum.*"

The inquisition passed on.

"Sit down!" hissed Rosalie, pulling at Diana's brief skirt.

"And now," said Miss Little, "we shall do a few of our sentences. Joan, we haven't heard your voice for a long time. Remember the first declension, dear? How would you say in Latin, 'The girl loves the rose'?"

"*Puella rosam amat,*" said Joan in a hushed voice, overcome by her own cleverness.

"Quite right. Sylvia, how would you say, 'The sailor loves his country?' Be careful, dear."

"*Nauta reginam amat,*" said Sylvia stolidly.

"Oh no, dear, no. You're mixing the queen up with the country. Tell her, girls."

"*Patriam!*" shrieked the class.

"Quite right . . . *nauta patriam amat.* And now, Alison, suppose you give us a sentence for a change, a sentence you have made up yourself."

Judging from Alison's face she looked as though the problems of the universe had just been handed to her for solution. After several moments of agonised brow-knitting plait-tugging, and glancing imploringly at the ceiling for inspiration, she burst out with, "The sailor loves the girl . . . *nauta puellam amat.*"

"Yes, dear," said Miss Little hastily, shying from the

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suggestion of sticky romance ; “ and now we’ll get on to the second declension. Page four . . . ‘ *servus*, a slave.’ Got it, girls ? ”

What a stupid lesson, thought Diana, and what a stupid language. I hate it and I don’t want to learn it. I shan’t listen any more.

All she could see beyond the window was a square of blue sky ; not a cloud to decorate it ; nothing. Suddenly a bird flew right across the blue square, from corner to corner, and was gone. That was fun, thought Diana ; I wonder if he’ll come back ? But the bird didn’t come back, and seen by itself after this slight adventure, the blue sky became boring.

Dare she ? Dare she ? . . .

With the utmost care, an inch at a time, both eyes widely fixed on Miss Little as though drinking in the teacher’s words, Diana slid a piece of paper from the notebook before her to the shelter of her knee under the desk. A pencil ? More groping, a nonchalant twiddle, and the pencil was hers, under the desk in exciting proximity to the paper.

And now, everything else forgotten, she was free to write a poem. What should it be about ? Her small brain began to blaze with the true inspiration of the artist, the divine afflatus. The title ? She rather prided herself on her titles. “ The Geography Fairy ” ? No, “ fairy ” was a bit lethargic ; “ pixie ” was more active. “ The Geography Pixie.”

It was going beautifully ; she had escaped into a world where no one could follow her. . . .

“ Diana ! What are you writing ? ”

She looked up blankly, half of her mind still in the clouds of cuckoo-land.

“ You were writing under the desk . . . bring it to me.”

“ I . . . I mean . . . ”

“ Bring it to me at once ! ”

“ It all seems so perfectly senseless,” said Miss Little, as they sat on the veranda after lunch. “ The child can’t be normal ; nobody will convince me that that poem is the work of a normal child. It is stupid, pointless, and just a tiny bit decadent, if you ask me. Now I have a little niece at home, younger than Diana, and she writes the sweetest little poems, all about dolls and pussies. But this stuff—— ! ”

“ Give it to me,” said Joanna languidly ; “ I think it’s beautiful. Full of frustration and the pursuit of the unattainable ; and too terribly, terribly sad. Here, Goldie, read it aloud . . . wait till I’m settled . . . now ! ”

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“‘The Geography Pixie’? Good title, isn’t it? Well, here goes.” Miss Golding cleared her throat and read:

“If you think of me to-day
You will find me in Bombay,
When another year shall pass
You shall see me in Madras;
If you reckon two years more,
Come and seek me at Lahore.
But lest you the hope should utter,
Never shall I reach Calcutta.”

“And that’s all,” murmured Jon, her head on a scarlet cushion and her eyes closed. “What unutterable pathos. Do you know, I could almost do it myself—I’m that kind of person. Listen, Goldie! . . .

“‘If you want to see me sooner,
You had better go to Poona.’”

“Has that the authentic ring, or hasn’t it?”

“It lacks something,” said Miss Golding with considerable gravity; “what about this? . . .

“‘’Ere the evening shadows fall,
You will see me in Bhopal.’”

“Oh, wizard! Wizard, Goldie! Little, you’re as silent as the grave. Are you overcome with emotion, or is it that you just can’t find a rhyme for Seringapatam?”

Miss Little who was quite incapable of this kind of badinage, and sensed that Joanna’s lazy shafts were being directed towards her with derogatory intent, said coldly, “I haven’t time for such nonsense. I have to go and write to my sister, *Miss Lewalter*.”

“To your sister? In England? But how on earth can you write to her?”

“Even if I can’t actually send the letters,” explained Miss Little coldly, “I write them just the same and keep them for her. Some day she will receive them, and she will like to know that I *thought*.”

“Yes,” mused Joanna; “that’s big of you, I must say.”

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"Jon, don't be so irritating," said Miss Golding.

"I'm surprised, Miss Lewalter," said Miss Little haughtily, "that you don't do the same for your mother. Or doesn't she *mind* not hearing from you?"

Joanna swung a long, slender leg and contemplated her tan Pinet shoe. . . . A bit awkward, deceiving Goldie like this.

"Oh, she doesn't care. I send her a *Carte Familiale* every now and then; in fact I bought one from the post office yesterday. They print on them the most dismal sentences . . . *je suis malade, je suis blessé, je suis prisonnier, je suis décédé* . . . you cross out the ones that don't apply. I believe Marshal Pétain invented the *Carte Familiale* himself as a suitable means of communication between his sundered peoples. I underlined all the worst phrases in red ink; that means I'm happy. Mummy will understand."

"*Je suis décédé* means 'I am dead'," Miss Little pointed out rather irritably; "they wouldn't put that on a *carte interzone*."

"No, they wouldn't, of course, would they?" said Joanna, smiling benignly. "How stupid I am."

Miss Little looked more approving.

"I must go," she said; "it's my duty walk. We shall go round the hill; I don't suppose there will be any Germans there."

"Oh, don't give up hope!" Joanna sang after her. "Some of them are quite good-looking."

Miss Golding hooked her foot round a basket of mending and drew it towards her.

"Jon, you're a perfect devil. We're in this thing together; why twit one another?"

"I wouldn't twit you for the world . . . have a cigarette?"

"Can't while I'm mending."

There was a blankness in Joanna's look as she gazed across the garden.

"Why are you frowning?" Miss Golding asked.

"I wasn't frowning," she said with a quick defensive gaiety; "I was practising a new expression, a sort of '*enfant surnaturelle*.' It was lost on you."

(But she had been frowning . . . that letter in her bag must be posted.)

She sprang up. "I'm going into the town. Can I get you anything?"

"I'm sure you can't," sighed Miss Golding, meaningly, "try as you will."

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V

Edith Golding, brushing her fine soft hair before the mirror, rolling it into the coil which so inadequately held it in position, was thinking as usual about the children in her care. The daughter of an old-fashioned country solicitor, she had lived from her earliest years in the tradition of duty. A serious pre-occupation with the higher ideals of life had been the key-note of her home; her mother a quiet, self-effacing, truly religious woman, her father a man whose integrity had no regard for profits or emoluments.

In that home, two silent, polite, unworldly daughters grew from childhood to girlhood, knowing little beyond their books, their prayers, and the simple hospitality of country neighbours. Alice, the younger, loved homely things and shrank from outside contacts. Her mother's constant companion, after the mother's death she slipped naturally into the position of housekeeper and confidante to her ageing father. She was one of those girls of whom neighbours would say over tea-cups, "Look at poor Alice Golding—no life of her own. A clear case of the stay-at-home daughter, brought up to be preyed upon by selfish parents. I call it wicked."

Alice did not consider herself "preyed upon" or exploited. Contrary to so many novels in which a young woman of this type seethes with rebellion and finally breaks out in some shocking display of abandoned behaviour, Alice was contented, and if she had any repressions or fixations she was never conscious that they inconvenienced her. She would have made an excellent wife for a country clergyman, but never even having played with boys as a child she shrank from men, unless they were her father's contemporaries, jovial and fatherly.

Edith was a student, the "clever" one. It was obvious to the parents that one day they must part with Edith, who should be permitted to have a career. She was sent to the county High School where she was always top of her form, and finally won a place at a well-known Oxford college for women.

She went to Oxford burning with enthusiasm for learning. It never entered her head that University life had a social side, though to some students it was the main object of a college career. Edith Golding got through Oxford on two "evening" dresses of neat dark silk, worn to hall and to meetings of the college literary society.

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She attended all her lectures and tutorials, and in the evenings read passionately and with utter absorption in the Radcliffe Camera or the college library. To her the men members of the University (to most of her fellow-students a constant source of amatory excitement)—simply did not exist, except as *sub fusc* figures in short black gowns who filled up the rows of chairs in lecture rooms.

On summer afternoons Edith and a friend of similar tastes would bicycle into the country, returning with bunches of wild flowers to be pressed and listed in their nature collections—a hobby which lasted during her three years at Oxford. Occasionally she would accompany another friend who took brass pressings from country churches, and adorned her room with the resultant knights and saints in effigy.

Sometimes she would take a punt, and drowse between the sunny water-meadows with Stubbs' Charters open on her knee; but she was not interested in Eights' Week or other girls' frantic efforts to get tea invitations to barge parties. Flannelled young men with gramophones would drift their craft past the plain, fair-haired girl bent in intense concentration above her book with but a flick of a glance; she did not give them even that.

She was to be a teacher, that was taken for granted; there were few other openings for degree-ed girls that offered such steady, reliable, and honourable prospects.

At the end of three years she graduated with second-class honours in History, and went to her first post; idealistic, unworldly, conscientious, without envy, malice, or any uncharitableness. She proved to be a good teacher, easily commanding respect from girls who would have ragged to death a lesser personality, for Edith Golding had both character and courage.

But she never thought that one day she would be trapped in a defeated, enemy-ridden France suffering alike under foes and traitors of her own blood; alone in a little sea-side town with twenty-three British children for whom she was responsible to England, their parents, and God.

Alone? Well, hardly alone, for there was always Miss Little, though she was clinging rather than co-operative. And there was also—praise be!—Joanna, wonderful Jon.

A smile of warm satisfaction broke over and irradiated Miss Golding's face. She was thinking of the days when she taught Jon in an English school, and was attracted to the child, contrary to her school-mistress's code of non-favouritism; of how their friendship had lasted, contrary to all critics of this ill-assorted

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pair; steady, quiet, plain, unworldly Miss Golding, with her occasional dry humour and constant devotion to duty, and Joanna, that marvellous girl, elegant, witty, brilliant, sophisticated—and not entirely reliable.

But now what a wealth of reliance Miss Golding had placed, in spite of herself, upon volatile Jon; now in this crisis by chance they were together, and the younger of the two had become to the elder a symbol of victory over their enemies, a slender shining spear of defiance. Jon with her vivid personality, her cool untouchability, was the complement to Edith Golding's steadier but less spectacular qualities. John always "got by"; together Edith and Jon would get by, in spite of Vichy and Berlin!

In utter confidence, for a moment Miss Golding prayed for herself and Jon, and reproached herself for worrying so about the children.

She changed her dress and went down, to find Jon reading in the sitting-room, while shouts of laughter and a clattering on the stairs announced that Miss Little was seeing the younger girls to bed. The older ones were allowed to read in their common room until eight-thirty.

What a contrast to her own had been Joanna's life, thought Miss Golding. No gracious, quiet retreat of family peace, but a shuttle-cock existence between incompatible parents—and *how* incompatible only those who visualised an Anny Bisset and an English doctor with rather an arid nature and a passion for medical research could imagine. Sometimes at "home" in a small English provincial town, in a glorious muddle of crazy house-keeping, sometimes pursuing a golden way through European capitals in Anny's triumphant wake—that had been Joanna's youth. Yet she had never expressed criticism of her parents; she had always seemed genuinely fond of both, for she had grown up with an impartial and tolerant nature, fortunately owning the gift of detachment from her environment. She had always possessed herself, had Jon. Most children after such an upbringing would have been nervous wrecks, or psychological monstrosities; Joanna had simply taken to herself the best of all worlds, and even in childhood had achieved a certain poise. What her queer kind of life had added to her was a patina rather than a blight. Lucky Jon. And because Anny Bisset had found herself in Paris in 1939 when the war began, there they had stayed with admirable non-chalance and typical obstinacy, right through the phoney war—the *drôle de guerre*—through the fall of France, and through the subsequent occupation. The permit for this visit of Joanna's

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had been achieved because—well, Anny had “friends”; leave it at that. After all, art was international.

“Any luck with your shopping?” said Miss Golding, turning over a pile of papers on her desk.

“Not much. I brought you a *Paris-Soir*—yesterday’s.”

“What’s in it?”

“A reprint of Pétain’s latest speech. Austerity diet, you might call it. He speaks as a father, he speaks as a leader; he tells us to obey. Patience is the most necessary form of courage. We are beaten, we are nothing else but beaten, and we deserved to be beaten—never forget that, children of France. *Il avait de la suite dans les idées.*”

“Did you read it on the way up?”

“I didn’t read it at all—I read his last but one. They’re all alike. Demobilising the nation for slavery, I call it. Philippe the First, known as the Perfidious. Goldie, I’m much more interested in food than in politics; there’s a *nice* supper to-night, cabbage soup, roast veal, cheese and apples—probably the last we’ll get. Isn’t it attractive?”

“I don’t know how you keep that figure, the way you eat!”

“Oh, I don’t suppose I shall coarsen till I’m forty; then I shall become perfectly gross and go on a diet. Goldie, how long have you had this school?”

“Eight years last Christmas. I opened just after Christmas, and it poured with rain for a week and everything streamed with damp. I might as well have opened a school in Manchester, never mind the Côte d’Azur.”

“I’ve often wondered what on earth made you—you of all people, English-provincial to the core—open a school in the South of France?”

“Well, Jon, it was just a series of events. This school, Villa Cosette, had been run for years by a Miss Trevor who was a cousin of Miss Gates, the gym mistress at St. Faith’s High School where I went after I left Inglewood. Miss Gates came out here for her Easter vacation, and found that Miss Trevor was wanting to retire and sell the school. She knew that since I had my father’s legacy I wanted to buy a school of my own, so she came back and put the proposition to me. Of course I said no, it wasn’t at all what I wanted; my idea was a small high school in a nice town like Lincoln or Winchester. But in the summer holiday she insisted on bringing me out here to look at the place, and for the first time in my life I fell in love at first sight. The minute I saw Villa Cosette I knew it was meant for me, and that I’d never be

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happy anywhere else. I bought it, engaged my staff, and took over at Christmas, as I told you. I thought it would take me a long time to get used to French life, but it didn't. Everybody was kind and helpful. Of course, I've never had any use for the holiday coast, for Nice and Antibes or even Mentone; artificial, over-painted, money-grabbing places. I grew to love Le Crisel, and I never use the word 'love' lightly. I love this countryside, Jon, very deeply, very dearly; the farms and the barns; the wine, the cheese, and the onions—which typify for me the people; the red earth of the vineyards; the dark-blue charm of the sea."

"How long is it since you were in England?"

"Six years, Jon. I can hardly believe it's so long ago. The time rushes by."

"I should have thought you'd have gone every year in your summer vacation."

Miss Golding shook her head.

"I've nothing to go for. My sister who kept house for my father up to the time of his death has left England, much to my surprise really. She was a very retiring person, and I thought she would never give up our old home, but she made friends with a Canadian lady who came over on a visit and has gone back with her as companion housekeeper. The Canadian is a journalist and lecturer, and needs somebody to run her flat, so it should be an ideal post for Alice. Even when I last went to England I felt a reluctance to leave here, so since then I have just allowed my roots to take a firm hold."

Joanna's fingers played with the leaves of her book.

"Last time I was in England," she said, "was just before the war. I went to stay with Daddy while Mummy did some concerts in Switzerland. I arrived back in Paris in July, 1939. I had a dull time in England, because Daddy was at his hospital most of the day and in his laboratory the rest. He seemed to have become more dour than ever; he had no interest in anything but research. And yet I shall always believe that in his way he was fond of me—say, next to his bacteria. I sometimes wonder whether I should have been Me if I'd had normal parents."

"You wouldn't have been Joanna Lewalter," said Miss Golding, her voice brisk with feeling; "and you wouldn't have been shut up here with me in a French school surrounded by dangerous enemies."

Joanna frowned and rapped on her chair arm.

"Now don't you take that line. There's more danger on the Paris Métro than there is here at the present moment."

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"Paris! And to think you might be there now if you hadn't stood by me."

Joanna put on a sarcastic expression and laid her hand on her heart, chanting,

"Ah, *qu'il était beau, mon vill . . .* age,
Mon Paris! Mon Paris!"

"You're crazy, Jon."

The door opened and Miss Little put her head round it, with an important expression.

"Oh, *there* you are, Miss Golding. I've been looking for you everywhere."

"Come in," said Joanna, flicking ash, and adding on the spur of the moment,

"If you had but sought her properly,
You'd have gone to Trichinopoly."

Miss Little who was quite incapable of a retort in kind, flung Joanna what was supposed to be a withering glance, and looked appealingly at her head mistress.

"Someone in this room, I fear" (said Miss Golding dryly),
"Left her manners in Kashmir . . ."

"What is it, Miss Little? You look quite distraught."

"Hilda Harcourt has a temperature, Miss Golding; a high temperature. She can't sleep."

"Any other symptoms?"

"No, but she's such a nervous, highly strung girl that she always gets a temperature when she's upset."

"Why should she be upset?"

"The other girls were talking rather foolishly about the war."

"They were? I shall have to speak to the other girls, and I'll come and see Hilda in a few moments."

"Oh, that doesn't matter," cried Miss Little with a smile of relief; "I can manage Hilda, but—well, she keeps on saying she wants her mother, and begging me not to leave her, so I thought perhaps you wouldn't mind if I put her in the sick-room and sat up with her to-night. I'm sure she won't sleep."

"Very well, Miss Little. Do as you like. Give her some aspirin, and——"

"There isn't any aspirin. Miss Lewalter"—with malicious

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emphasis—"had the last two on Thursday when she got a headache with swimming too long, at least she——"

"All right, Miss Little! If Hilda gets any worse you can call me. I hear Marcel taking in the supper, so you'd better have yours before you go up."

"Oh, thank you, Miss Golding. I'll just run up and tell Hilda you've given me permission to stay with her. I'm sure she'll be all right."

"There you see the best side of Miss Little," said Miss Golding as she took her seat at the supper table and began to cut up the rather stringy veal. "She's kindness itself to the girls, and far, far more maternal in her attitude towards them than I could ever be. There must be something wrong with my make-up as a teacher; I've never found in my pupils that outlet for my pent-up mother-love that thwarted spinsters always discover in books."

"Perhaps you haven't got anything pent up," said Joanna lightly. "In any case, Hilda Harcourt oughtn't to be encouraged. She gets a temperature every time you mention the war; I bet when Paris fell she went up to a hundred and ten. There was a kid like that who used to play accompaniments for Mummy—*enfant prodige*—he was only about twelve. Once in Budapest——"

"What's that about Budapest?" asked Miss Little, reappearing silently and slipping into her seat. "Only a very, very little, dear Miss Golding; the wee-est piece. . . . Really, Miss Lewalter, you ought to write a book, with all *your* experience. I'm sure it would sell like anything."

"It wouldn't be in the least interesting," said Joanna, pulling a roll apart; "it would promise so much and reveal so little. You can't write reminiscences that will sell unless your lovers have been well-known artists or society men, while mine were all poor, obscure sailors from the docks. It was amazing how, while Mummy was singing in palatial opera houses at Hamburg, Lisbon, Naples, Odessa—I would be making a bee-line for the docks. Just a low, primitive instinct."

"Really, Jon!" Miss Golding reached across with a fork and rapped Joanna's knuckles hard. "Miss Little, surely you realise she is making up this nonsense. I'm surprised that you give her such openings."

"There's many a true word spoken in jest," said Miss Little with a meaning glance.

Joanna looked at her with a rapt, interested gaze.

"What a wonderful phrase, Miss Little. It's so true, so full of *esprit*. It was your own, wasn't it?"

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"Do you mean to say you haven't heard that before?" asked Miss Little, thrilled at scoring a point. "I *am* surprised, with all your cosmopolitan knowledge and *savoir faire* that you never heard a well-known proverb like that."

"Quiet! Both of you!" rapped out Miss Golding, brandishing her fork.

After Miss Little had gone up to her patient and they sat alone with their weak, hot coffee, she said to Joanna, "I sometimes wonder why people describe the countryside as peaceful when all through history it has been the background for so many tragedies?"

"Yes. You hear a curlew crying, and it's the saddest sound in the world. I remember you once telling me at school about the curlews on Culloden Moor. Actually it was an awful stretch of the imagination, Goldie; you said they were the descendants of the actual curlews that saw the battle, and handed down the sad story to all the little curlews for ever and ever. I've never forgotten it."

"Did I actually say that? The things I shall be held accountable for! But . . . I did see all the men march away from this little town, most of them never to come back."

"A grim thought for a spinster, I'll admit."

"If you joke I'll brain you, Jon. We seem to be coming to an end of all the beauty of life. You know that as well as I do. Somehow for myself I care very little. I've seen lovely things and read beautiful books, and if I haven't seen and read more, that's my own fault. But for these girls who haven't had anything yet from life, I care a lot. And for you, too, who ought to have so much. Oh Jon, I wanted a splendid life for you—my prize pupil. Material wealth—yes, but much more than that; the greatest riches of mind and spirit, and the riches of love. You have such a way of detaching yourself from things that it would have to be a true *grand passion* to hold you down. How old are you now—I forget?"

"Twenty-five."

"Twenty-five, and far too self-contained. At twenty-five you ought to be mad about a man."

The girl laughed.

"Not much choice in these days, Goldie. I'll tell you when it happens, I promise; but I'll wait and see who wins the war first. I must marry on the winning side. Sorry! . . . You're one of the few really genuine persons I know."

"Genuine! I should have thought you could apply that word to most of your friends and acquaintances."

"You thought wrong." Joanna gave a shrug. "You'll

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come a cropper yet with that pathetic faith of yours in all mankind. I haven't known above three genuine people in my life."

"Including your parents that makes——"

"My parents!" Joanna gave a shout. "Goldie, you're too entertaining. With all my regard for Daddy and my affection for Mummy, nobody—no, nobody!—could possibly call either of them genuine. And that is why, Goldie, you must never expect too much of their daughter. Now get up, lazy, and I'll play the piano for you."

VI

In Bedroom One, Paddy, Eileen, Anne, and Christabel were gazing rather guiltily at Hilda's empty bed.

"She must be pretty awful," said Paddy, "or they wouldn't have carted her off to the sick-room."

"Perhaps she'll die," said Anne.

"I wouldn't be you if she does!" said Eileen.

"Nor me," agreed Christabel. "It was Anne who told her what the Germans did at that girls' school in Poland."

"Well, she shouldn't be so soppy and believe everything."

"You try telling them that at the Préfecture."

"Oh, shut up!" said Paddy. "They can't do anything to Anne if we guard her guilty secret. And you were as bad, Eileen. You kept putting in the gory bits that Anne forgot. Fancy Hilda asking Little to sit up with her all night!"

"If Little sat up with me all night I'd die of screaming hysterics," said Christabel.

"Then you'd be one less for the Germans to bump off," said Anne with a giggle.

"Shut up about the Germans or I'll cosh you such a slosh you'll see double for a month."

"Actually," said Eileen, "I mean—*actually*—it's pretty awful feeling like Gordon at Khartoum."

"Speak for yourself."

"Well—you know what I mean."

"Uh-hm," said the other three together."

"If I die, Anne, and you live," said Paddy, "you can have that gold bangle of mine. And if ever you get to England—and I don't—you can take my camera to my sister Bridget. She always wanted it."

"Oh, isn't it *awful*!" burst out Christabel. "I say, let's all

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make our wills. Then if they get found—afterwards—everything will be all right.”

“Who’ll find them?” asked Anne in an interested tone.

“The Second Front, of course—when it comes. Gosh, I hope I’m here to see them when they come. Wouldn’t it be super to see a lot of British soldiers charging along with fixed bayonets? Whoops! Jolly good show!”

“*Must* you be so hearty?” asked Paddy scathingly.

“Too, too depressingly juvenile,” added Eileen.

Christabel, duly squashed, went on plaintively, “Just think, it will soon be Christmas. The Germans don’t allow Christmas, do they?”

“Nuts!” said Paddy.

“Oh!” shrieked Anne, changing the subject, “did you see Goldie’s face at prayers when Sheila was reading the lesson. I thought I should have died.”

“Sheila simply can’t say her R’s and she always chooses a lesson with loads of R’s in it.”

“Yes, and when she got to ‘Bawabbas was a wobber’ I thought Goldie was going to have a fit. Wasn’t it a scream!”

They all rolled on their beds with exquisite mirth, when suddenly Paddy said, “Sh! There’s somebody coming. . . .”

The air was still shrill with their mirth when Miss Golding walked in, a small lamp in her hand.

“Were you talking? I’m surprised to find senior girls breaking the rules. Paddy, I expected perfect order in *your* bedroom.”

“Sorry, Miss Golding.”

“Don’t let it happen again.”

“How is Hilda, Miss Golding?”

“I’m just going to see. It’s past eleven o’clock, you should be asleep.”

The head mistress passed on and quietly opened the sick-room door. Hilda lay, wide-eyed, on her pillow, while in the circle of lamp-light sat the patient Miss Little, reading aloud, rather monotonously, from “Pride and Prejudice.”

“You should be asleep, Hilda,” said Miss Golding gently.

“I can’t go to sleep,” said the child fretfully; “every time I shut my eyes I get nightmares.”

“Well, you certainly won’t sleep lying there with the light on and listening to stories. Let me straighten your pillow . . . like this . . . now turn on your side comfortably . . . that’s right . . . and here is a special treat for you, a hankie soaked in Miss Lewalter’s lovely eau-de-cologne from Paris. Isn’t it delicious?”

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We'll turn the lamp out . . . so . . . and Miss Little will sit by you quite quietly in the dark. Try it for ten minutes, and please be fair and don't move. That's better, Hilda. Everything is quite safe, and you haven't a thing to worry about."

She walked purposefully to the door.

"Good night, Hilda my dear. God bless you."

"Good night, Miss Golding . . . th-thank you."

Miss Little followed. "May I have a word with you, Miss Golding?"

"Certainly. What is it?"

Out on the dark landing, the door closed behind them, Miss Little went on in a strangled whisper, "It's on my mind. I feel I ought to speak to you."

"Come down to my room. Everyone else is in bed."

In her study Miss Golding set down the little lamp upon her desk. She shivered slightly; these November nights were sharp, though the days were so warm.

"I hardly know how to put it," said Miss Little; "you're so trustful, Miss Golding—always seeing the best in other people and expecting them to have your standards. You believe so terribly in people that—well, you are blind to their real natures; I was going to say, deluded, but it sounds so rude."

"I prefer frankness, Miss Little. I shall not call you rude."

"Well then, to be quite frank, Miss Golding—do you think something dreadful is likely to happen to us, now the Germans have come?"

Miss Golding's eyes widened with surprise.

"Is that all you wanted to say to me?"

"Not—not exactly. But if you are relying on people to stand by you in an emergency, I would like to say that I will stand by you and the school, to the bitter end."

"Thank you, Miss Little. I appreciate your loyalty, and I hope there will be no 'bitter end.' Miss Lewalter has lived under the Germans in Paris for two years—more—and she assures me there is no reason why they should not allow us to live here in peace. We are quite non-political, non-interfering people, even if we are British. Miss Lewalter refuses to allow me to be apprehensive; she has been a great source of support to me."

"That's just it," broke out Miss Little, turning pale with excitement; "Miss Lewalter. Miss Lewalter. Always Miss Lewalter! That's just what I meant when I said, Miss Golding, that you get so fond of people that you don't see them as they really are. You're pinning all your faith on Miss Lewalter; I've

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seen it more than ever these last few days. You look at her as if she was a—a guardian angel, or a holy prophet, or the rock of ages, or—or something. Oh, Miss Golding, you oughtn't to have such implicit faith. You're going to get such a dreadful, dreadful awakening some day."

The headmistress smiled gently.

"That is exactly what Miss Lewalter keeps telling me. But I am what I am, and I cannot change my nature—nor do I want to abandon what gives me such delight and comfort, my faith in my friends."

Miss Little suddenly seized her handkerchief and pressed it to her lips.

"Don't trust her," she burst out in muffled tones; "dear Miss Golding, I beg you not to trust her. She'll let you down, I know she will. She's not our kind; she has no traditions, no standards. She's fascinated you and bewitched you——"

The head mistress stopped her with a stern gesture.

"Miss Little, you are going too far. You must stop immediately. I cannot allow such unfounded suspicion of my friend. I know that you and Miss Lewalter don't get along together at all well, and it seems to me that you neither of you try! But to accuse Miss Lewalter of insincerity—well, Miss Little, I shall just overlook what you have said. You are tired and in the morning you will probably be sorry about this conversation. Don't be sorry; I have forgotten it already. There! I should go back to Hilda if I were you, and I hope you will find her asleep. Lie down on the other bed and try to rest yourself."

"Oh, Miss Golding, Miss Golding!" cried Miss Little reproachfully. "It's only my regard for you—my esteem for the school. Truly it is."

"I know that, and I understand."

"If only you would have listened to me——"

"Please! That will do."

"You are so just, so fair, Miss Golding."

"I hope I am."

"Please allow me to ask one question—is Miss Lewalter to stay here for long?"

"Miss Lewalter is going to stay here, with me, until things have settled down and she is able to return to Paris with the assurance that all's well at this end. Until then, I should like to see a little more friendly co-operation." Her swift, warm smile took the stiffness out of her words. "And now, good-night, dear Miss Little, and thank you for all you are doing for me."

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Miss Little stood for a moment with downcast eyes, then with a stifled, "Good night, Miss Golding," she flitted away.

Goldie stood silently in the study, her hand on the lamp. Jealousy! Poor old Little, Jon must definitely be stopped from twitting her. And Jon? What a lot of things I don't know about Jon, thought her friend, as she turned out the light.

VII

"But, Madame, I tell you there is no food. There is nothing. I have come back empty-handed, me, who have shopped in Le Crisel market since I was a mere baby learning to crawl." Simone the cook spread her hands.

Miss Golding looked in dismay at the empty baskets.

"But, Simone, do you mean to say the shops were all empty?"

"Not all empty, madame. But where they had food they would sell me nothing. They said my ration cards—our ration cards—were out of date."

"They were not out of date last week! Out of date? Nonsense. I had them stamped myself at the Préfecture a month ago."

"That is what they said, madame. They would serve me nothing at all."

"But it's ridiculous, it's outrageous. No meat, no fat, no oil, no potatoes, no milk——"

"No bread, madame."

"What bread have we in the house?"

"Enough for to-day, but it is rather stale."

"Give me the cards; I shall go to the Préfecture."

Half an hour later, in her plain grey coat and skirt, shirt blouse and tie, felt hat pulled over her fair straggling hair, she confronted an apologetic official who knew her well.

"I'm sorry, Madame Golding. I can do nothing. Your cards are invalid."

"But I hold the cards of three adults, twenty-three children, and four servants. You have known us all for years."

"I know, I know." The man looked worried, and tried to conceal it under an official manner. "I am told what to do; I must do it. Things are not easy now, *par exemple*. *Que voulez-vous, c'est la guerre!*"

"Is that all you can say?—There's a war on! My servant

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was unable to buy us any food at the shops this morning. Will you tell me what we are supposed to do?"

"That is not my affair, madame."

"Not your affair? What are you here for?"

The man bristled. "To obey my orders, madame, and not to argue with difficult people. One does not argue in France to-day, one obeys."

"Where did these new orders come from? . . . You don't answer; well—I could guess. May I ask if any provision has been made at all for us, or are we expected to do without food altogether?"

The man said with a kind of frightened reluctance, "I can do nothing; how should I? I am only told that the Villa Cosette is one of those places to which new ration cards will not be issued. That is enough, madame; there are others waiting for my attention, if you will kindly move on."

"This is outrageous. I cannot understand——"

"*Il ne faut pas chercher a comprendre, madame.* I take orders, I do not give them."

"I shall appeal to the American Emergency Committee."

"Move on, please . . . the next one, please."

When she reached Villa Cosette she was so tired that she stood listlessly in the hall, holding her hat in her hand.

"Any good?" said Joanna, suddenly appearing; "no, I can tell from your face. It's such a warm morning I've got all the girls out in the garden making a painting of the house. They can stay there another hour yet."

"How thoughtful of you, Jon. I don't know what we shall do—meat, fat, cheese, sugar. . . ."

"And the bread ration?"

"Two hundred and seventy grams . . . it was sufficient, wasn't it?"

"What do you say if I try to get in touch with the Black Market? Some people do very well."

"Millionaires with small families, no doubt."

"Yes, it *was* a feeble idea. We shall have to live on the country now. Vegetable soup, fruit, onions, cabbage, tomatoes, radishes. Ersatz coffee isn't rationed, we can get that. Fish—we can meet the boys at the boats. And listen, Madame Dufoire at the farm will do anything for you. They have their own flour; she'll make us bread."

"And she always has quantities of her own cheese. Oh Jon, I feel much more hopeful. What a help you are!" Miss

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Golding's uplifted face was radiant. "I feel we're in the fight now, and we're going to win. This is almost exhilarating—so long as the children don't suffer."

Joanna laughed. "Let me go to the farm myself, this afternoon. Little can take the girls for a walk while you plan ways and means. Thank goodness it's a cool misty day and looks like rain; they won't regret their bathing beach so much."

"Better not go in that Paris creation." Miss Golding pointed laughingly to the scarlet tailored frock with its white epaulettes, and the white and scarlet shoes to match.

"I'll wear old slacks and a peasant shawl."

"Good. I'll go now and explain the situation to Simone; she must rustle up an austerity lunch. Service with a smile."

"I like being challenged," Jon called after her.

She ran upstairs gaily, but paused and slowed down to a walk before she reached her room. Food! Things might not be so good or so amusing as one thought. It wasn't much fun to be hungry, or to live on vegetable soup and bits of bread that one could scrounge; people had tried it in Paris, and it was grim. She had never thought it would come to that at the Villa Cosette. Damn those Germans! For a moment she thought longingly of Paris. Food? Mummy always got by. But no . . . things weren't really so bad. She would stay, and stand by Goldie, do a bit of food scrounging to make life exciting, and let Paris miss her all at one and the same time. Organisation! Wonderful Jon!

She rooted in her drawers for suitable clothing and a peasant shawl.

This tackling of a hard-headed French farmer's wife was one thing which she could do for Goldie; Goldie, at this very moment torn between natural apprehension and her faith in Joanna as a miracle worker.

Actually Miss Golding was more than a little worried; she had to admit it to herself. Anxiety showed itself in a restlessness which would not let her sit down, even at her desk, but kept her walking from desk to window and from window to door. This new move . . . this food business. It might be only a trifle, or it might be the *beginning*—of what? Come on, Edith—of what? Put it into words. Nail down your fears and you see they are only made of mist, as Father used to say. You used to read things in the papers; you knew that they happened to other people, but you never thought they could happen to you.

Up to now she had been lucky, very very lucky to be left at

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her school in such comparative peace. Others hadn't been so left; the Vichy government had its horrible internment camps . . . the whispers went round. And now it wasn't the Vichy government any more that ruled her destiny, the fate of Le Crisel; it was the jack-boot of Germany.

She cheered herself up by reminding herself of *why* the Germans had come to the south of France; they were scared—scared stiff of the mounting victories of the British armies in North Africa; they no longer had all the time in the world; they had to get to Tunisia quick because the tide was against them. Wasn't that something for Edith Golding to be thrilled about? Jon would say so!

And as for herself, here she was grouching in her study while Jon went out to do the dirty work! She should be ashamed of herself even to entertain a defeatist thought while she had such a splendid friend. Whatever life might take away, it had given her a tremendous gift in her friend, Joanna. Joanna, who wore her vitality like a charm; who knew no weakness or dread.

Ill-matched they might be, she and Jon, to outward appearances; inwardly they were complementary. That was the secret of it all. Edith Golding smiled, and remembered that she had come to her study to choose a subject for the senior girls' history composition. . . . "Would you rather have been a king of England or a king of France in the sixteenth century? State your reasons." . . . Was that too difficult? It would give them scope, anyway.

Joanna came back at last carrying her large, flat basket as though it were heavy. The sudden dark of evening was almost ready to fall.

"Hallo, Goldie. Here I am." She sounded unperturbed.

"I should have gone myself. I shouldn't have let you do——"

Joanna smiled. "You wouldn't have been half so effective. I know how to out-French the French. Here . . . let me put this thing down."

"What did she say?"

"Well . . . I got to the farm and sat in the hedge until I was quite sure the coast was clear. Then I went across. Madame was in the kitchen. I told her the story, and she was touched to the heart."

"I bet she was!"

"She said it would desolate her to have to disappoint Madame Golding for whom she had so much regard—which I thought

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rather ambiguous. Then I turned on the diplomacy, and in the end she said she would do what she could. Nothing definite, you know, but I think she'll be all right. Naturally she'll have to be frightfully careful; she has herself to think about."

"Of course. Jon, it was marvellous of you to go. I wonder——"

"She said if I went at night with a basket, she'd leave things lying about. Good idea, isn't it?"

Miss Golding set her lips firmly. "One thing is certain, I am not going to allow you to be roving about the countryside in the dark. I never heard anything so dangerous and ridiculous."

Joanna gave her a cold look.

"You'll have quite a job to stop me, Goldie. Look!" She uncovered the basket. "Just a bit to be going on with . . . bread, cheese, sausage, onions—there are potatoes to come—and a bottle of wine."

"Mercy! That won't do for the girls."

"It'll do for us," said Joanna coolly, "and never mind the girls for once. If they were French they'd have been brought up on *vin ordinaire* in any case." She swept off her shawl and held it at arm's length, wrist flexed with exaggerated grace. "Goldie, I'm prouder of that basket than anything I ever did in my life. I feel I'm one up on the enemy. I'm getting my topped-up feeling . . . you know; I'm going to win, I'm going to win, and nothing can stop me. It's my Englishness; it's my Daddy coming out in me."

Miss Golding, lifting the precious basket, remarked dryly, "And when you twit poor Miss Little I suppose it's your Frenchness, but I would *not* like to say it was your Mother coming out in you."

"Oh, Mummy's a great twitter." Joanna laughed gaily. "Twitter—what a word."

Miss Golding put down the basket.

"Jon, I know it's a most inappropriate time to ask, but I always think of it when you're not there. How on earth did your father come to marry your mother?"

"Why, darling, it was romance. Pure opera." Joanna dropped the shawl, struck a theatrical attitude, and lapsed into a chair reaching for the cigarettes. "Daddy was a grim young English research chemist, all retorts and test tubes, no small talk, no graces. Mummy was resting at her home in a little village in Brittany after a concert tour. She always went back to her family; she

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was devoted to them though they were peasants ; that was very French of her. When she was in Brittany she wore peasant dress too, and wild flowers in her hair. Daddy was having a walking holiday all by himself. He was sitting in a little *estaminet* when he saw a beautiful girl crossing the square. His hard, scientific heart blew up into a thousand fragments ; he said to himself, That is the girl I am going to marry. He asked who she was. . . . 'Oh, that's Anny Bisset, the daughter of old Bisset the saddler, opposite the convent.' So he found her and wooed her, and she fell for him—just like *that*. They got married on a Sunday, and she found she had married a Bunsen burner and he found he had married half Europe. She tried to make a go of English life, but can you imagine *Mummy* ! I was born quite early on in their married life—after less than a year—and that settled her for a while. Then her agent came after her, planning concert tours, and off she went. She came back . . . she went . . . she came back. That was the key-note of my childhood. Daddy and she hadn't a thing in common, and they didn't even try. I blame them both. When I was eight she took me to Europe with her ; I loved it, I was mad about it. We came back . . . we went again . . . we came back again. Then we went longer than we came back—if you understand. Finally Mummy made her base in Paris, and I went to England to school and to stay with Daddy. He was a difficult person, very self-centred and intolerant ; but I've always sworn he was fond of me. He hated music . . . and yet he never stopped me from singing, and I know that he sometimes listened when I left the door open. And once he bought me a present—a diamond brooch—because I admired it in a shop window. I have got that brooch at home, and I shall keep it always . . . isn't that sentimental of me ? I never wear it, because Mummy would say '*Sapristi* ! Where did you get that ? ' and I wouldn't want to tell her. Poor Daddy ! He showed people the worst side of his nature, and the people in his laboratory hated him as much as they admired his work. I found that out, and it worried me when I was a schoolgirl. When the war began in 1939, Mummy hadn't even seen Daddy for years. He died in 1940."

"I think you owe him a lot, Jon . . . your Englishness, as you call most of your best impulses."

"I like my Frenchness too ! " said Joanna hotly. "I wouldn't be anything but a mongrel if you gave me the choice. I adore being Me. I worship myself."

"I know you do, my poor deluded child."

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"*Deluded!*"

"But still my dear friend, and my strength and stay."

Joanna snorted a cloud of smoke from her nostrils.

"Thinking of those girls again, huh?"

"How can I help it? I don't care for myself—you know that. But the Germans are here . . . here! here! at Le Crisel. They've stopped our food. I'm not going into this blind, Jon."

"The Germans, the Germans. Pst! to the Germans."

"As you say." Miss Golding took up the basket and started for the kitchen. "Thanks for our food, Jon," she said, looking back.

Joanna's wide grey eyes slid round.

"Don't mention it. You're very welcome."

VIII

Miss Golding woke early to the hushed silence of a still sleeping house. She groped for her watch, shook it, held it to her ear, and finally looked at the time. Ten minutes to eight.

With one bound she was out of bed and into her house-coat. Why had Dédé not called her? Why was everything so quiet at nearly eight o'clock in the morning?

She came out on to the landing.

"Dédé? Dédé?"

Silence below.

She ran along the corridor knocking at doors. . . . "Get up, everybody; it's late . . . it's nearly eight o'clock."

Then downstairs, calling as she went, "Simone! . . . Marcel! . . ."

The curtains were still drawn; the rooms were still half asleep. Was that the sound of the sweeper in the dining-room? She pushed open the door . . . "Mariette?"

There was no one there.

On to the empty kitchen; she put her hand on the stove. Only faintly warm, from last night. The servants were not in the house, unless they were still in bed.

Quickly dressing, she went to Joanna's room.

"This is the latest, Jon. The servants have gone."

"Gone?"

"It's past eight o'clock; there's no sign of them and the stove is nearly cold."

"How did you know——?"

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"Their bedrooms are empty and all their clothes gone. They must have slipped off in the night."

"I never heard a sound. What's the idea?"

"Neither did I," said Miss Golding grimly. "I can't imagine." (Sinking ship . . . rats leaving the sinking ship. Or did they? She had always meant to ask a sailor.)

"I'm going down to see to some breakfast, but I've got to get the stove heated up before I can make coffee. Go and control the girls, Jon; don't let them jabber."

Joanna, running a comb through her long, sleek hair and turning up the ends, said casually, "Have you washed this morning?"

"My dear, I hate to admit it, but I have not. I haven't had time, only don't draw attention to it."

"That wasn't my point." Joanna turned, ready dressed. "There isn't any water."

"Jon!"

"The taps don't run. It's been turned off at the main."

"But who—do you mean Marcel——?"

Joanna shrugged her shoulders. "I'll get a bucket and try the old well in the garden. We shall have to boil it."

"You mean, it's—like the food?"

"Shouldn't be surprised."

"Well, keep the children quiet. Say I've turned it off—anything. What next?"

"State of siege, I'm afraid, Goldie. I don't care, if you don't."

"Good for you, Jon. I'll see you later."

The well water was brownish, but not smelly. Once the stove was hot and the big pans of water kept boiling for half an hour, it was possible to make coffee and put on some sort of a breakfast.

Afterwards the girls, excited at the novelty, cleared away and washed up. A boy arrived from the farm with potatoes. Joanna drew up more well water and boiled it.

"Dinner!" said Miss Golding. "Potatoes in their jackets and a wedge of cheese in each."

"I'll go foraging after dark," said Joanna. "I ought to have been up early if I was going to meet the fishing boats."

"Early—and late! Jon, you can't do it. I'll go out myself to-morrow. How long can we go on like this?"

"We'll get used to it." Joanna was fastening her coat. "You can't leave the school, it's obvious, Goldie. I'll do the running about. I know where Simone lives: I'm going down now to put the fear of God into her."

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"She's my servant ; I'd better go myself."

"Ah, but Simone and I speak the same argot—the French equivalent of Billingsgate. Leave her to me. I'll get to the bottom of this walking-out business."

She was gone an hour, and came back frowning and with an angry gleam in her eyes.

"No go, Goldie ; they're not coming back, the devils."

"Why did they go ?"

"Oh, I got to the bottom of it at last. They'd been promised new ration cards and all the rest of it if they'd clear out. The call of their damned stomachs was too strong and they hadn't the guts to tell you the truth and go out decently. *Canaille !*"

"Don't be hard on them, Jon. Why should they starve with us ?"

"Oh, you're impossible. Now the servants did right to clear out and save their skins, did they ?"

"*Save their skins ?*"

"Metaphorically speaking." Joanna, usually unperturbed, felt an inexplicable irritation. "I'm going down the garden to smoke a cigarette. We can make soup out of all those vegetables."

"Don't bother about soup now ; you're too generous to me already, Jon. Go and have your cigarette ; I've got everything under control, and the girls are making a rota for the house jobs."

Joanna strolled along the terrace, drawing furiously at her cigarette, hands deep in pockets.

In the schoolroom, windows wide open, Miss Little was rehearsing one of her scenes from Shakespeare.

As usual there seemed to be more argument than Shakespeare, but it kept the children busy, and everybody got some sort of a part since the "principals" were changed for each scene.

"No, no, *no*, Barbara ! You always come in too soon. You must wait until Felicity has *finished* her speech. Felicity says, 'Dare to make it true,' and then begins to walk towards the window. Let her take *three* steps, and then make your entrance."

"But, Miss Little"—Barbara was very indignant—"she didn't walk to the window. I waited and——"

"Well, I was just going to ! Barbara didn't give me time."

"I did ! I waited for simply ages."

"Girls, girls ! We'll go back to the beginning and do the whole scene again. Joyce ! Will you please try to remember you are a lady-in-waiting and not a tavern wench. If you giggle

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again in that *childish* way I shan't even let you be in the end of term play."

(End of term play! thought Joanna. Lord, what a hope.)

She turned up her coat collar, and suddenly realised that she was hungry. In the confusion she and Goldie hadn't managed to get any breakfast at all. Hunger. A minor irritation, and one to be expected in war-time. But need it? Joanna Lewalter didn't take well to being hungry. A sudden picture rushed into her mind, of the warm flat at Place du Parc; she and Mummy at the low table before the open fire which Mummy had learned to love when she was in England; the tray with hot crisp rolls, butter, honey, steaming delicious coffee in a jug and china tea in its silver pot . . . loads of everything . . . munching . . . toasting your toes . . . reading your book while the butter dripped over your fingers. Yes, butter! Perhaps at this very moment Mummy . . .

Joanna looked up and saw the post-woman turning the bend of the road between the garden bushes. She went to meet her, and a moment later blessed the impulse, the whole series of small events which had led up to that moment.

There was only one letter, in a grey official envelope, addressed in a stiff, spiky hand to Miss Joanna Lewalter, Villa Cosette, Le Crisel, Alpes Maritimes.

Joanna pushed it into her pocket, and turning—not too quickly—strolled back to the house and up to her room. Feeling slightly guilty, she locked the door.

Inside the grey envelope was a folded sheet bearing the type-written words, "From Colonel-General von Perlberg's office," and inside that what she had expected—Mummy's letter.

For the first time for two months something very like homesickness stirred in Joanna's heart. The hunger resultant from her missed breakfast; the stormy interview with the errant Simone; the brown well water and the bruises which the rope had left on her hands; yesterday's food business, and the prospect of having to go out to-night in the dark and forage for provisions. Well, she was doing it for Goldie, and Goldie appreciated it, and under the circumstances it couldn't be different—but oh Mummy! Oh Paris! You little knew the heroic rôle for which your Jon had cast herself, or let herself in, whichever way you chose to look at it. If it wasn't for Goldie having such faith in her—but Goldie had such faith, and that was all there was to it. Joanna made a grimace of resignation and opened her letter.

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Place du Parc 92,
Paris.
le 28 novembre.

"My darling Jon,

"I was so glad to get your letter. Colonel v. P. sent it round at once which was most kind of him, and he also asked me to come to his office and had a little talk with me. Well, darling, you have been down at that place for two months now and things are very different from when you went—you know what I mean! It is all very well that Goldie person and you with your don't-care-a-damn attitude, but you are so blind, blind, blind, I could shake you, my child. Now here it is, you are to come home at once, now, this minute. It is not safe for you to stay any longer. You know I do not exaggerate, not I, and I tell you there is great danger and Colonel v. P. says if you get yourself mixed up in it the more fool you for he can do nothing—but nothing!—for you then. He says, tell Yohanne she must come away now, but at once. I cannot say any more, but something will happen down there in a day or two and my daughter must not be there when it happens. Oh you are reckless, you don't care, but you are like me, you know when it is time to walk out. It is time to walk out, my Jon. You ask, what to them are these harmless children? Not so harmless! Many of them are the daughters of British officers, they might be useful—in case. There is one, Clairmon, Clairmoon—you see how much is known—and she is the daughter of a British air ace who is high on the list. So much I was told; of the rest I had better say no more. My darling, how I long to see you. Paris is gay^{er} than of late, and perhaps, soon, I shall have the chance to sing again. Why not? We cannot mourn for ever or call ourselves the defeated. Live and let live, I say. We have good friends, you and I; we are wise, we live. Enclosed is your pass to cover your journey—again our good friend has helped. The door of the flat is open already; I await you anxiously. War is fate, chérie; but we have handled fate before, you and I.

"Your ever loving Mummy."

To say that she letter was a surprise was far behind the truth; it was an indescribable shock.

Joanna read it again, slowly, and laid it on the bed. She began to walk aimlessly about the room, finally coming back to the bed, pulling at her coat buttons, dropping the coat on the bed and standing still to stare across the room at nothing.

"This alters everything," she said and realised she had spoken aloud.

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Without her coat she already felt cold. It was cold, cold here on this November day. Cold . . . hunger . . . brown well water . . . the chafing of the well-rope . . . defaulting servants . . . and to-night an unedifying scramble over the misty dark fields in search of food.

She looked at her hands, already reddened and scratched; a nail broken; then back at the letter. Yes, that was the authentic voice of Mummy, and Mummy never panicked or exaggerated. Only a fool would fail to follow Mummy's lead, ever. . . . "Something will happen down there in a day or two!"

She shivered and rubbed her cold arms under their soft, thin crepe sleeves. The big *salamandre* in the hall, which used to heat the house was cold now for lack of fuel, and winter on the Côte d'Azur could be horribly penetrating.

She must get out of here without losing any more time. There was danger. Real danger! She must get out! On to-morrow's train? There was only one train a day to Paris. Well, why not to-morrow! Better not let Goldie know until the last minute . . . and then think up something. Her mind raced ahead, planning. To think that ten minutes ago she had been organising the siege with Goldie, as though it all lay ahead of her, while now . . .!

Cool and calm again, she rummaged out a cardigan to match her dress, pulled it on and went downstairs.

In the schoolroom Miss Little and her troupe were still at it. Heavens, could it only be ten minutes since she passed the window before? So much had happened in her mind, it felt like another day.

The shrill voices forced themselves upon her ears.

"No, no, no, Margaret, *dear*! Can't you realise you are supposed to be saying good-bye to your father whom you may never see again, and you sound exactly as though you were saying, pass the butter." (Giggles of appreciation from the class.) "Now try it again, from the beginning, and put some *feeling* into it."

Margaret repeated her lines in a sustained hysterical shriek.

"Now that's much better! I knew you could do it!"

Joanna went into the kitchen. Miss Golding sat there, industriously peeling potatoes.

"Shall I peel some of those?"

"No. You'll ruin your hands. Jon, do you think we shall be able to get any more servants?"

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"Oh, I should think so. Some of the women—the fishermen's wives and so on—would come in during the day."

"I think I'll go out this afternoon and see what I can do. The children . . . let me think . . . the seniors can do an arithmetic test—one of those old School Certificate papers—if you'll be an angel and invigilate. Make them take the whole two hours. It's really the juniors' needlework afternoon, but they've spent the whole morning murdering Shakespeare so they had better do something solid . . . geography! . . . I'll tell Miss Little. Oh dear, the whole school time-table seems to have gone up the pole since the Germans came."

"Goldie! What a priceless remark! Only you could have thought of it. France falls in ruins about your ears, and the school time-table is disorganised. I'd better go and draw some water."

"I wish you would, only that'll ruin your hands too."

"Tell me a job around here that won't!"

She was glad to escape from the kitchen; conversation with Goldie could become embarrassing now. The pass to Paris lay upstairs, locked away in her leather case.

It was midnight when, tired, under-fed, and nerves on edge after the long, strained, frightened day, Joanna pulled the two suit-cases from under her bed and began to throw in her clothes. Some time had been secretly spent in a search for a man with a cart who would fetch her luggage from the school to-morrow in time to catch the Paris train. Now that was all arranged. She looked down at her wet skirt and shoes; the last of her night prowls after food was done, and a perfectly revolting experience it had been. Only for Goldie would she have done it . . . darkness, cold, and damp, and the long wait outside the farm until, quite certain that she was not being followed, she ventured up to the window with the unlatched shutter and received her basket . . . the heavy basket which seemed as though it would break her arm before she got it home.

But that was all over now. Escape!

Quickly and methodically she packed her clothes, to the last folded blouse. Over a pair of shoes that would not fit in she frowned anxiously; then shook her head and replaced them in the cupboard. They would have to be abandoned; good shoes too, in these days.

It did not occur to her that even such slight sounds as she made would be audible to wakeful ears in the silence of the night. Miss Golding had greeted her with hot coffee on her return and

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had said good night before they went to their separate rooms, presumably to sleep. Now Joanna stood rooted to the floor as a light tap came at her door.

"Jon! Is anything the matter?"

"No . . . no. I'm all right."

"I could hear you moving about. Can I come in?"

"No. I . . ."

It was too late. Why, oh why, hadn't she locked that door? Miss Golding stood before her, looked at the filled, open suit-cases, at Joanna's face. There was a moment's awkward silence; Joanna, usually so ready for any situation was silent.

"So you're leaving us, Jon? . . . I don't blame you—really I don't. After to-night . . . it was fine of you, but it's got you down. I understand . . ."

Joanna, relieved by action, threw down the lid of a suit-case and kneeled upon it to fix the locks.

"It isn't a sudden impulse, Goldie. I was going to tell you to-morrow. It's Mummy. Mummy wants me; she says I have to go back at once. It isn't for myself . . . I don't want to go. But you know what it is—Mummy . . ."

"Of course I understand. But how——?"

"She—she got a message to me."

"Is she—Jon, is she in danger?"

"No . . . oh no, I don't think so. But she thinks—she's highly strung, you know—she needs me."

"Then you must go, of course. I wish you'd told me earlier. Can I help in any way?"

"I ought to have told you, Goldie. I was rather afraid to."

"Afraid of me! We're friends. What is that but perfect trust?"

"I know. You're so good, Goldie. I—I'll come back if I can."

"How are you going to travel?"

"On the train to-morrow."

"But have you a pass?"

"Yes. I had a return pass when I came."

"I didn't know there was such a thing as a return pass."

"Mine was a return pass."

"But you said you had had to give it up at the *Renseignement* when you arrived?"

"Did I? You must have misunderstood me. They gave it back."

"Well, so long as you're all right. . . ."

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As though Miss Golding suddenly realised what it would mean to her to be without her friend, her face changed. Joanna turned away from that look.

"Oh Jon, I shall miss you so terribly!"

"I shall miss you, Goldie. I hope you'll be all right!"

"Of course I shall. Forgive the outburst. Everything will blow over and settle down. Thanks for all you've done."

"I haven't done much."

"We had better say good night all over again. I'll see you in the morning. Get some sleep, Jon; you'll have a long journey, and it won't be too comfortable. You must take lots of food with you; I'll see about that in the morning."

"Don't give me your food."

"You've earned it."

"No. . . ."

"Good night, Jon."

"Good night."

As the door closed Joanna let out her breath. All those lies . . . and Goldie looking at you with those clear eyes as though she could read your soul and know that you were running away because you were scared stiff, and getting letters through the enemy, and not being a wonderful person at all. That stung a bit, but it wasn't worth bothering about at a time like this.

She finished her packing, and when there was nothing else left to do she sat in bed with her knees drawn up to her chin, quite unable to sleep because of that fluttering as of a panic-stricken thing trying to escape which fills the frightened chest and makes breath come fast and hard.

"Something is going to happen down there in a day or two" . . . it mustn't, it mustn't, until I get away! The very inaction of those night hours made her more terrified.

Just before daylight she fell into a heavy sleep, and woke to hear the rising bell sounding. Quickly she jumped up and dressed in her travelling suit. She placed her hat, fur coat, gloves and handbag on a chair, stripped her bed, looked rapidly round the room from which she was about to flee.

She could hear some of the girls chattering downstairs as they prepared breakfast. It seemed mean not to go down and help, but how with her present intentions could she face it?

At three minutes to eight she went down, and saw Goldie standing in the hall, with down-bent head, gazing at a sheet of paper which she held in her hand. There was something unusually tense about her figure.

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She heard Joanna's step and looked up.

"It's come, Jon," she said in a strained voice. "It's come."

"What——?"

"A German soldier put this through the door. I saw him going away. It says . . ."

Joanna stood speechless with questioning eyes.

"It says," went on Miss Golding in a dry, controlled voice, "that I am ordered to vacate these premises—the school buildings and living house known as Villa Cosette—by sunset to-night. It says they are required for military purposes. . . . But they—they *can't* be!"

"It's just an excuse. They——"

"It's the end, Jon. Where are we to go? They don't tell us . . . you know what that means."

Joanna felt her cheeks go tight and cold.

"Oh, Goldie——"

"So now we know. . . . Oh God! The children—what shall I do? *What shall I do?*"

Joanna felt sick and dizzy. She could not speak.

After her brief outburst, the old Goldie had come back, calm and controlled.

"What are your plans, Jon?"

"My train is nine-thirty. I ought to be at the station at nine o'clock. There's a man coming for my trunk at eight-thirty. If he doesn't come I'll—I'll leave it."

"Your lovely clothes? That would be a pity."

"Goldie . . . don't!"

"Good gracious!" said Miss Golding, "it's ten past eight. Ring the breakfast bell at once."

Joanna sat in her old place, and ate nothing. She managed to swallow a cup of coffee; she did not look at Goldie. Miss Little was busy supervising the girls.

"Prayers," said Miss Golding rising, "will be in five minutes. Quietly, girls. . . ."

They all streamed out; Joanna was left to the last.

"Are you coming in to prayers, Jon?"

"No . . . thank you."

"How much time have you?"

"I needn't go yet. The cart is just coming in at the gate. I'll see to my trunk——"

"I'll see you after prayers."

She stood in the hall feeling lower than a worm and yet desperately determined to go. The familiar smell of school was all

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round her . . . beeswax and blackboards. The gay treble voices of the girls rose, and raced through a favourite hymn; then the clatter of feet and chairs as they knelt. Now it would be the prayers; a prayer for the Royal Family and the Collect for the day.

To-night . . . but you couldn't bear to think of that. It was a nightmare; it couldn't—it couldn't be true. Anyway she'd be gone, hundreds of miles away with luck.

Was Goldie *telling* them? . . . Why such a hush? . . . What was she saying to them now? If you had imagination you couldn't help picturing it, thought Joanna standing there miserably, with bitten lip. To-night . . . to-night. . . .

Something would happen to save them. Something simply must happen. Clare . . . Paddy . . . Anne . . . Sheila . . . Diana—here in the roaring storm, and England so far away. Only Goldie holding them all in her feeble arms of loyalty and love, and imposing upon these children a burden of bravery almost too heavy for men to bear.

What a long silence . . . then suddenly the tinny crash of the piano, Miss Little sitting there defiant, and—they were all rising with that same clatter of feet and chairs, rising to sing, "God Save the King"! Treble voices, wavering, a little hysterical, but loud and proud . . . and at the end a childish wail as one of the juniors burst out crying. Cut off abruptly, there came another silence; that would be the Benediction. And now—dismissed—she could hear them all streaming out of the far door into the school-room; a door slammed.

Miss Golding came out of the kitchen door into the hall.

"Look, I've made you sandwiches. I found a last little tin of ham in my 'treat' cupboard. That was lucky."

She held out the sturdy paper parcel. The bread of love before the face of doom.

The blood rushed to Joanna's cheeks.

"What, take your food? No, no—I couldn't—I won't."

"Of course you will, don't be silly," said Miss Golding coolly, stuffing the packet into Joanna's bag. "You'll be lucky if you get to Paris inside of twenty-four hours. You shan't die of starvation on the train, anyway. And now you must go. I hope the journey won't be too awful."

"Goldie, I—perhaps they won't—what will you——?"

(What was there to say? What could anybody say?)

"I don't really want to go . . . I wish I could have seen it

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through with you. You'll be all right. They——" stammered Jon.

"Yes," said Miss Golding. "We'll be all right."

They laid cold cheek to cold cheek in a brief kiss.

"I'd better not say good-bye to the girls."

"No. I've told them. It's asking a lot of them—to face this thing out. Good-bye, Jon, and bless you."

"Bless *you*, Goldie. And thank you. You've been such an angel to me. The war will be over some day, and then——"

"Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

Twenty-four hours to Paris, Goldie had said. It was actually twenty-nine. Twenty-nine hours in the cold, stuffy train, the sandwiches all gone, the thirst nearly killing you, your legs and feet dead, your head splitting. Waiting, and moving on a little, and waiting again. Crowded, herded, crushed, all you could think about, all you were conscious of was your own physical misery. You didn't—you *wouldn't* think of what you had left behind. Before you, somewhere almost unattainable, home shone like a star.

At last the Gare de Lyons. Painful to stand on those cramped legs. No taxis. She left her luggage at the station and took the Métro. After what seemed like hours, sick, exhausted, dirty, starving, she came to the familiar door and dragged herself up the stairs.

"*Mademoiselle est retournée !*" called the concierge joyfully.

"Mademoiselle certainly is !"

Suddenly the air was filled with the sound of a golden voice singing gaily, "*L'amour est enfant de bohème.*" Mummy! Everything was going to be all right. No more misery, no more worrying or wondering what you ought to do, no more anxiety, no more danger. Nearly, no more war.

The flat. The door was flung open wide. There stood Mummy with her arms stretched out, and behind her all the golden glow of home.

"My darleeng!" cried Anny Bisset. "I knew—but I *knew* you would come!"

IV

I

WHEN an icy restraint falls upon two people who a short time before were coping with the embarrassment of a surprising intimacy, dumbness and a desire to escape are its natural outcome.

When Joanna came to the end of her story and stopped talking, she realised very quickly that she had evoked a silence which would take a deal of breaking.

She sat back in the seat of the car, nervously fumbling for mirror and make-up box, as woman instinctively does in moments of mute emotion, only to realise that her companion had given her one horrified glance, as though to say, "Just what I thought of her. One minute she pours out her soul and the next she makes up her face!"

Too late, she pushed everything back into her bag and snapped the clasp.

She said, with forced casualness, "Well, that's that. You'll want to be getting back to London . . . 'a poor lonesome cowboy, and a long ways from home.'"

"Yes, we should go. It's nearly seven o'clock," he said, almost thankfully pressing the starter of the car.

(He has no words, she thought; I've shocked him into silence.)

Her gloom deepened as he drove for miles without speaking. She was quite right in supposing that he was shocked. It seemed to him that just when he was beginning to understand Joanna he was forced to admit that there was no end to the revelations about this strange girl. His doubts of her had returned in full measure as the story of *Le Crisel* was unfolded. Had it cost her anything to reveal herself to him as a false friend, a coward, self-seeker, liar? Or was she just an exhibitionist, playing for effect? Was it glamour she was after, or sympathy? In his heart at that moment he conceded her neither. It appeared to him as though her whole life was phoney, a series of messed-up situations through which she had trampled ruthlessly, seeking drama, sensation, and

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above all self-flattery and self-gratification. A type which he had never previously encountered; a type with which the prudence and integrity of his own nature were at war. It gave him no pleasure now to realise how deeply he had involved himself with her, how their intimacy had progressed from the day of that first chance meeting. He was not the kind of man who could view the whole affair subjectively; keep his real self outside of it, watch and be amused, and hold the disturbing influence just beyond the verge of reality. He had allowed her to draw him out, with that rare and fascinating personality of hers. Fascinating . . . a phoney, suspect kind of word.

Yet more—much more—than that had flowed from her to him. He had not lived thirty-six years in the world to be deceived by feigned sincerity, feigned sympathy. If she were not, in certain aspects of her character, genuine, then he would never trust a human being again. And if genuine in one thing, why not in another? Could it be that here was the actual struggle of a soul? At least he knew that he must eventually give her the benefit of the doubt, for he could never escape from her now. The acknowledgement brought him dismay rather than relief.

At the moment he had nothing to say to her. He shot a sudden glance at her, drawn into her corner of the car. There was a rigidity about her, as she stared straight in front, her face shut, locked with despair. No one could simulate that expression. She was undoubtedly suffering. But why? Because of her own folly and error, or because her story had not made the desired impression on him? He dismissed the latter supposition as soon as he had made it. Emotionally unstable as she might be, she was never capable of such shallow falsity.

With an effort he said, more curtly than he intended, "Are you cold? Shall I put this window up?"

"No." Her subdued voice was slightly questioning.

"I thought you looked cold. The sun has disappeared."

He was nettled by the idea that there might appear to be something boorish and uncouth in his long silence. He could not leave it at that.

He said, "You mustn't misunderstand me. I don't know what comment you wanted me to make on your story."

"*Wanted* you to make?"

"I didn't even mean it that way. My first reaction was——"

"You were bitterly shocked. I saw that."

"It was so unexpected. But I'll hand it to you, you weren't afraid to tell a story against yourself. You've got courage."

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"It shouldn't need courage to test a friend."

He was silent, wondering whether he ought to feel ashamed.

"Listen," she said. "I had to tell somebody sometime. I had to. I had to choose somebody with whom there was the faintest chance they'd understand . . . or else go crazy. I thought you might be the one. I'd forgive you any reaction. You must have thought me mad. You must have thought, there's no end to this woman's horrible revelations. You did think that. And yet—I'm so lost. That was what I couldn't make clear."

Suddenly she pressed her clenched fist against her mouth. It was that primitive, unstudied gesture of universal grief which opened in him a flood of pity.

He said, "I do understand—that you're hurt and can't help yourself. And that there's something about you which inspires friendship from the strong and the good. Why not try to live up to that? . . . Come now, Jon, I'll you take home."

She roused herself at that.

"Don't take me home. For God's sake, Bagpipes, don't take me home . . . not now . . . not yet."

He drove on, through the rather intricate traffic of Streatham High Road, Brixton, Kennington, into London.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"To the studio, if you like."

"Oh, yes, please."

He said no more until they drew up at the block of buildings where the studio was, on the third floor. She followed him as he limped rather awkwardly up the long flights of stairs; his lame leg was more than usually stiff with the strain of driving.

He opened the studio door with his Yale key. It looked rather dim and unwelcoming, as a room often does when it has been left empty all day. He crossed over to the window and drew the chintz curtains, shutting out the fading blue of the London evening; switched on the electric fire which soon glowed brightly amid artificial coals. The room looked more inviting.

Joanna pulled off her hat and laid it on the wide divan under the window. A breath that was like a sigh escaped her. Her whole body seemed to have lost elasticity.

He said quietly, "Come, Jon. You've tormented yourself too much and far too long."

"I don't agree," she said, turning round. "And you are only speaking lightly because you don't want to be faced with anything so serious and trouble-making as a judgment. It will always go on. Can't you see it has to be a life penance? Nothing

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can ever wipe it out. You said once that nobody has to go on paying for ever. But it isn't true . . . they do. I've proved it."

"Why do you ask me to be your judge?"

"Because you're the only person I trust."

"That can't be true. Your husband's mother, and his sister——"

"I couldn't tell them what I've told you."

"No . . . no, you couldn't. I see that!

She hesitated, and then sat on the arm of a chair.

"I'm sorry I've spoiled our day like this."

"You haven't," he said vehemently. "No, it was inevitable . . . it had to come out. I've often wondered what was at the bottom of that sadness of yours . . . that forlorn-ness. Sit down in the chair properly. Let's go on from where we were—do you want to? We'll be practical now. Of course, you found out what happened to Miss Golding afterwards? Let's go on from there. Tell me."

She turned her face away.

"I did find out. They sent her to the concentration camp at Marseilles."

"Was it—a very bad place?"

"A horrible, degrading place."

"And the children? Go on, Jon."

"Some of the children were sent there, too, the ones they wanted to keep as hostages. The others were turned loose on the country to fend for themselves. They may have found shelter with the peasants . . . I believe some of them did."

"And what did you do about it? You had influential friends."

Her voice broke.

"Oh, why do you make me tell you the most damnable part of it? I didn't do anything. Nothing at all. There! Oh, I know what I ought to have done, what anybody with a shred of decency would have done . . . worried people! Pestered von Perlberg and Mummy's important friends, and the Vichy minister we knew. Kept on and on at them, until they did do something. Get Goldie released, or else get myself sent down there, too, for being so persistent. But I didn't—do you hear, Bagpipes? I didn't do a thing, because it would have made unpleasantness for me and Mummy, and we didn't like unpleasantness. Life in Paris was difficult enough, anyway. I even told myself, it won't be for long after all. The war will be over some day and she'll get released all right. After I was married and France was free, I made some enquiries and found that Goldie was alive, but very

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much aged and broken down. She had been released and had gone back to Le Crisel to try and trace the children. So I—I left it at that.”

He gave her a coldly searching look, and walked over to his work table where he stood fiddling with a box of pencils.

“Did you ever write to her?” he asked suddenly.

“Write to her?” she asked in amazement. “How could I?”

He nodded.

“That’s typical—how could you! How long would your friend be in the concentration camp?”

“Nearly two years.”

“Nearly two years. And what were you doing all that time?”

She gave him a flashing glance.

“Do you think I could forget? At first, yes, but as the time went on it grew worse and worse. Mummy didn’t understand, she said I was a fool to worry. You see, she was always jealous of my friendship for Goldie. It got that I couldn’t sleep at nights.”

“And you still did nothing about it?”

“No.” She put both hands up to her cheeks. “That was what broke it up in the end between Mummy and me . . . I mean, me developing a conscience. We grew quite apart. In the end I had a nervous breakdown.”

He looked up sharply.

“So that was the cause of the famous nervous breakdown!”

“Then I went down to stay with some relatives of Mummy’s in Brittany. It was there that I met Hubert.”

He slapped down the box of pencils with a disconcerting rattle.

“So that’s how it all hung together! Brittany. Jon Lewalter passes out, and from the ashes rises all glorious the Countess of Lusca. You do have the most inordinate luck, don’t you? Right out of one bad life into another, and an earl thrown in. I bet you forgot your nervous breakdown. It’s a hell of a story; I don’t know when I heard a better.”

She stood up.

“Go on,” she said. “Flay me. Scourge me, Bagpipes. You’re through with me anyway. If you’ll say the very worst you can think of me, I’ll feel humbled and perhaps a little nearer absolution.”

“Absolution! That’s good.”

She retorted quietly, “I thought there was such a thing, for even the worst sins.”

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"The worst sins?" He looked up at her. "What is your idea of the worst sins, I should like to know?"

"Mine," she answered, simply.

He was impressed in spite of himself.

"I wouldn't judge you, Jon," he said more gently. "I don't know what I should have done in the same situation; looked out for myself, probably."

"Not you!" she said briefly.

"Are you a Catholic?" he asked suddenly. "The French mostly are."

"No. Mummy was, and I used to go to Mass with her. I don't think I'm anything."

"That's a pity," he said quietly. "Absolution has to be spiritual. It comes to your soul from God when you're really desperately sorry. No man can give it to you."

"I didn't say I had no religion. I've said so many prayers."

"Praying for the easy way, perhaps?"

"How did you know?"

"I just guessed. We all make that reservation—not the hard way."

She nodded.

"How right you are! I've thought all the time I was going to get out of it the easy way. I've been a fool as well as a coward. Fate and my friends have always been too kind to me—and now, you. You start off scornful and censorious, ready to flay me, and then it all passes off. Supposing I ended it . . . under a taxi . . . any dirty sort of death?"

Anger shook him, and then passed. He thought, she's lived for nearly four years with this poison in her heart. I can save her now, or kill her soul. Do I care enough?

He said, "Listen, Jon. Flaying wouldn't do you any good. I believe you're sincere—yes, honestly, I believe in you. I hate the person you were, but we're not dealing with her now. My dear . . . you must stop feeling the way you do. It will never get you anywhere, it will destroy you in the end. All this time you've been loathing yourself, torturing yourself. It's the wrong way."

She interrupted passionately, "I've thought of everything. There isn't any other way."

"It seems to me—do you want me to help you?"

"Oh, I do."

"It seems to me that you can only atone for a wrong to one person—I mean, an unrightable wrong like yours—by serving

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other people. Service, that's it. Service to the world until you feel that you are gradually levelling the score."

"What can I do? Can I do anything now?"

"Not right away. We'll have to think. I'll help you."

"There's nothing in my present life. I think I had that idea of yours, in a way, when I came to live with Hubert's people because they wanted me to. I mean, pleasing them instead of myself. But it hasn't worked, and I'm afraid it never will."

He thought for a moment.

"Don't worry," he said gently. "We'll find a way."

He was dismayed to see her with her head in her hands, abandoned in a fit of crying.

He went to the cupboard-like place which served the studio as a kitchenette, and switched on the electric coffee-percolator. There was condensed milk in one cup, and brown sugar in another. Thinking for a moment, he opened a small tin of chopped ham, rummaged for butter and bread, and made a clumsy, mannish-size sandwich. The coffee was bubbling, and he poured a generous cupful, put everything on a tray and carried it back to the studio. She was sitting quietly on the divan now, with downcast face.

"Here," he said. "You must eat all this. When you've just cast out seven devils you're bound to feel a bit empty inside. Carry on, now."

She looked up, her face ravaged but somehow hopeful.

"You shouldn't have done that. Aren't you having some, too?"

"I'll go and make mine now. The coffee's boiling."

"You are an angel."

He left her for a few moments and came back with his own scratch meal. They ate in comfortable, intimate silence.

She put down the tray.

"I'll go now. I don't know how to thank you."

"That's all right, Jon."

"I'd like to see you again soon . . . to know that we haven't broken up."

"Broken up? . . . No."

"We nearly did."

He stood up.

"I'll get you a taxi down below. When you get home, go straight to bed. Have some milk, and four aspirins to help you to sleep. Is there anyone to look after you?"

"My maid will be waiting for me. That's her job."

"Is she a kind person?"

"Kind? Proudfoot? Well, she's efficient." She picked

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up her hat. "I'll be coming on Tuesday with Merle Tellar, as usual. Is that right?"

"Till Tuesday, then."

As though still unsure of herself she did not say another word, not even good-bye. As the taxi swung round the corner she looked through the back window and saw him still standing on the kerb in the fading summer twilight.

II

In the taxi Joanna lay back, pulling at her gloves, spent with emotion and with the humiliating sense of having made a scene. She asked herself over and over again whether she regretted having unburdened herself. Whether she felt better—or worse—now that her story was out. How kind he had been, how restrained. An over-facing situation for any man, to take out a girl for an afternoon and be treated to a fit of spiritual hysterics. He might easily have shied from her, laughed at her, made love to her; those were the obvious reactions of differing types of men when a woman gave way to an impulse of self-revelation. That he had taken her seriously spoke for his quality, and proved to Joanna that once again she had picked herself a friend who was far too good for her. What had he said? . . . "There's something about you that inspires friendship from the strong and the good. Why not live up to it?"

Flattering . . . and yet disquieting words.

One thing he had given her, hope; one lesson at least she had learned from him, the negation of her old arrogance. She who had thought herself Wonderful Jon, privileged, important, was now so humbled that there was hardly anyone to whom she did not feel inferior.

Live up to it? Easy for him to talk! And was he thinking about her now, and what was he thinking? That she was a nuisance, a sob-sister, an exhibitionist, a bored society woman out for sensation? Curse you, Jon, it serves you right! she thought, taking out a cigarette, tapping it, and absent-mindedly putting it back in the case.

But he was not thinking of her then. Manlike, his reaction from the day's emotional extremes had been to seek the company of other men and the cheerful shop-talk of the Sketch Club. The one who was thinking of Joanna was, strangely enough, her mother-in-law.

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Isabel had turned up for tea in Henriques Place. Isabel's new black-and-white Rolls, and Isabel's new chauffeur—in black with white facings—had stood outside Number 8 for two hours.

Isabel's first words on entering the drawing-room were, "Where's Joanna?"

"Gone into the country," said Lady Lusca, who had quite openly been asleep. "Isn't it hot? How are you, Isabel?"

"Frightfully well, but a bit frustrated," said Isabel.

Lady Lusca's delicate eyebrows rose.

"Quite candidly, my dear, I'm surprised you stay in London. Don't you think it would be far better for you—and the heir—to rest quietly at Darchingham? So cool and tranquil."

(What she would have liked to say was that in her day a lady of rank who was six months pregnant would no more have shown herself in London during the Season than she would have danced barefoot in Piccadilly. Times certainly did change, and always for the worse.)

"Oh, I don't think so," said Isabel calmly. "It's bad enough to miss the Buckingham Palace party and all the dances without having to give up the bit of fun I do get from looking on and eating some very good dinners. Where did you say Joanna was?"

"She's gone down into Surrey to see some friend of her mother's," said Lady Lusca in an amused, disparaging tone. "I wanted her to take the car, but she wouldn't. I managed to get her a reserved carriage on the train—at least Esther did."

"Old friend of her mother's?" Isabel unwound her furs and loosened the folds of her blue silk coat. She looked very smart in a hat consisting of three white suede roses, and wearing the triple rope of Lusca pearls round her throat. "Operatic, French, bohemian, male or female?"

"Some old woman, I believe. Retired singer."

"Is she coming back to-night?"

"I sincerely hope so."

"Well, will you tell her to be sure and come to lunch to-morrow. I've got a most amusing party. Two film stars."

The old lady adjusted her glasses with a gesture worthy of Queen Victoria.

"What," she asked blandly, "are film stars?"

Isabel laughed.

"Constance darling, we live in another world from yours."
(Constance, indeed!)

"And how are the children?"

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"Flourishing. Darchingham tranquillity agrees with them. Nanny writes every week and Lavinia occasionally. She has quite a Dorothy Osborne style; letters from the country, you know. She'll probably grow up literary. Have you heard from Barbara lately?"

"Yes. Always incoherent, dear Barbara. She'll have to make an effort as the girls grow older. They can't spend their whole lives tearing round a paddock. It seems absurd that in another ten years time, when I'm seventy-three, I shall have to start chaperoning girls through a Season. Because I'm sure their mother won't."

"They'll probably be married to horse-copers by then," said Isabel, "whatever horse-copers are. I've no idea, but they do sound the sort of people Barbara's girls will meet socially. And talking of the Season, there's one going on now, you know. Do you think that's why Joanna seems so subdued?"

"Subdued?"

"Well, you can't say that she's even in normal spirits, let alone good ones."

"Joanna has no desire for balls, Ascot, or night clubs."

"Good heavens no. I wouldn't want her to be that kind of war widow. That night at Ciro's made enough talk among the wrong kind of people. But I don't like to see her having to make such a tremendous effort, for her hostess's sake, to be just a little bit interested in life. Beyond myself, she doesn't seem to have any friends."

"She's been going about with Merle Tellar. And I've been trying to get her interested in pictures. She ought to collect something; it's a great occupation for the mind."

"I should think," said Isabel, "that Merle Tellar and Joanna have about as much in common as a Jersey cow and a cockatoo—not that I'm comparing either to either. As for interesting a beautiful young woman in pictures—well, it's just asking her to start an affair with an artist, isn't it? You can't admire art in the abstract until you're over forty."

"Really, Isabel!"

"I'm sorry if I shock you, but I haven't any Edwardian reticence. And if you can't be outspoken in your own family, where can you be outspoken?"

"I am proud to say of my daughter-in-law," said Lady Lusca y stiffly, "that she is still my son's wife. She does not forget it."

Isabel shrugged her shoulders.

"You know best."

At that moment Graystead created a happy diversion by appearing with the monumental silver tea service which was a tradition

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at the house in Henriques Place, followed by a maid pushing the tea trolley.

Isabel's eyes sparkled at the sight of the lavish cakes and sandwiches.

"Hullo, Graystead! Always on the tick of four; I believe you wait on the mat till it strikes."

"Well, not exactly, my lady."

"There's one thing left to me," said Isabel. "I do adore my tea."

But when she was gone the older woman found her thoughts uncomfortably occupied. Joanna, Joanna, always Joanna. There was nothing wrong with the girl, beyond the fact that she was unusually highly strung, introspective, reserved. And also perhaps just a little out of her element. For the first time Lady Luscaj allowed another thought to creep into her mind. This all comes of a man marrying out of his station. If only Hubert had married a nice girl of his own class, the daughter of a family we knew and understood, there would have been none of this strain; it would have been so easy and pleasant for everybody.

These thoughts lingered in her mind during her quiet dinner, alone with Esther, and prevented her from concentrating upon the game of cribbage which every Saturday evening she played with her elderly neighbour, Sir Harry Fantost. She lost game after game, and excused herself with an old-fashioned headache.

It was a relief when, just as the large gold-shaded lamps were being switched on against the mauve twilight, Joanna's taxi drew up at the door.

The girl looked pale and exhausted.

"It's so tiring visiting the sick," said Lady Luscaj sympathetically.

Joanna flushed a little.

"Do you mind if I go straight to bed?"

"My dear, I should. Esther, ring for Proudfoot. Oh, Isabel was here. She wants you to go to luncheon to-morrow. She has some film stars, whatever they are."

Joanna smiled.

"That was kind of her."

"And she thinks you're not looking well."

"She's crazy."

(There's nothing the matter with her, thought Lady Luscaj. It's Isabel. She does get ridiculous ideas, and she ought to be at Darchingham; I shall send for Simon and tell him so!)

Joanna meanwhile waited with feverish impatience for Tuesday.

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Cursing herself for such eagerness, she arrived at the studio ten minutes before the appointed time. She knocked, and hesitated, furious with herself for this unaccustomed inconsistency.

But the door was opened promptly, and he said with the old casual friendliness, "Come in. I saw your taxi drive away. Lady Tellar hasn't arrived yet. I hope she won't hang me up by being late."

"I'm to blame for being early."

"Cigarette?"

"Thanks."

"How cool your dress looks."

"I don't feel so cool." (How sweet of him to make everything so natural and right!)

He was lifting the green linen cover from his canvas; she went and stood beside him.

"It's going to be exactly like her, Bagpipes. Vivid but static."

He pushed out his lower lip thoughtfully.

"She'd have done better to get a coloured photograph. That's all this is going to be."

"Where's that illumined look that was in Lady Lusca's picture?"

"You're asking me!" He ran his fingers through his hair. "That was a fluke; I told you so at the time. I'll never be able to do it again. I'm a rotten painter, Jon. I'll have to concentrate on the commercial stuff; I'm only a representationalist after all."

"Represent——! Who do you *want* to be—Picasso?"

"One needn't fly to extremes."

"Why so despondent all of a sudden?"

He said grumpily, "I've got one of my chills. I'm chock-full of aspirin and taking a dim view of life. There's someone at the door now—my sitter. Go and park yourself by the window, Jon, and pray that I may be civil."

To both Joanna and the painter that hour's sitting seemed a long one. Lady Tellar alone of the three in the studio knew no impatience. Lacking in expression and vitality she could sit placidly for hours if necessary, hardly stirring, wanting neither to talk, drink, or smoke.

When the sitting was over Joanna saw her to the street and into her car, watched her out of sight and returned to the studio.

"You were right to paint her in a wine frock, Bagpipes; it makes her look mysterious. And that stiff violet silk curtain behind her head makes me yearn to have it behind mine—if it could do for me what it does for her, which I doubt. What do you mean by one of your chills?"

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"Oh nothing," he said carelessly, tidying his work table. "I'll go home and sleep it off, along with my bad temper. I hate being out of sorts."

"Do you run a temperature?"

"Now what earthly interest can my temperature be to you? . . . Shall we have some coffee, or a nice strong cup of tea? While the kettle boils you can tell me what progress you've been making."

"Progress?"

"Towards self-adjustment. You look serene this morning."

"I'm happy because you haven't changed. I dreaded meeting you, after Saturday, in case you'd closed up and become remote. People do, you know."

"Yes . . . it's a common experience. Tell me——"

"Surely you don't want to hear me talking about myself any more?"

He smiled.

"I want to know when you've found a solution to your problem."

She walked across to the window and back again; then turned and looked at him.

"Bagpipes, I've come to a sort of conclusion. I'll never do any good till I cut right out of this life. I've tried; I'll never make a go of it."

Grasping the kettle, he threw her a quick glance without speaking. He made the tea and poured out two cups.

"I'm in my wrong element," she said abruptly. "I don't belong—of course I've known that for ages, but all along I've thought it was my duty to try and make a go of it, for Hubert's sake. Now I don't think I was right. Jon Lewalter and Joanna, Countess of Lusca, are two different people, and if it's the first I want to deal with I ought to get her back on her own ground. Do you understand me?"

"Vaguely."

"I ought to have done it long ago, told them that I wasn't of their world and gone back to the world of ordinary people, like you and I are. But I didn't favour the idea of earning my living, thrown on my own resources. I don't like it now, but it appeals to me more than it did then, for obvious reasons."

"You mean to leave your mother-in-law and live on your own?" he asked, startled.

"More than that. I mean to do it honestly; give up the title and the name—for their sakes, there isn't going to be any notoriety

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about this affair—and quietly disappear. Then Jon Lewalter will have a chance to start again. Am I right?”

“You fling these drastic ideas at me and then ask me if you’re right! . . . Here . . . help yourself to the sugar. . . .” He cleared a corner of the work table and hoisted himself on to it. “What’s your idea of earning your own living? You must have loads of money.”

She turned to him with a flash of impatience.

“I haven’t any money of my own. I would not take Hubert’s income even if they offered it to me, which they won’t. I told you, this is going to be an honest start. You think I’ll funk it when it comes to the point?”

“I think you’re more likely to do something quixotic and get yourself into another messed-up situation. You do specialise in them, Jon.”

“Don’t you see, it’s because every change I’ve made has been for my own advantage, or at least I thought it was going to be for my advantage? This will be the first honest thing I’ve ever done. That ought to make a difference to the way it turns out.”

He turned his tea-cup slowly round on the saucer.

“I think you’ve got plenty of courage, but have you any plans?”

“Yes. You know my father left his laboratory, and what money he had to endow it, to the municipality of Harbridge. Actually it was more than a laboratory; it was a small school of medical research. It’s running now, and they call it the Lewalter Institute. I think if I went up there they couldn’t, for my father’s sake, refuse to give me a job. I could be a kind of lab. girl, if nothing else, to wash out sinks and retorts. Don’t look at me doubtfully, Bagpipes, as much as to say, Could I take it?”

He said thoughtfully, “I feel a bit appalled. I mean, I’m partly responsible for this.”

“No, you’re not. It would have come to me in time, even without you.” She made expressive gestures with the empty cup still in her hand. “Look at the alternative. At the end of July we leave London for Scotland, Lady Lusca’s brother’s place near Dunbar. We stay there for perhaps two months; then back to Darchingham. It would be death in life for me. How could I begin what you said . . . ‘service to the world till you level the score’; wasn’t that it? How could I, Bagpipes?”

He slid off the table.

“My dear, you must answer your own questions.”

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"Then I shall take this step."

"When?"

She hesitated.

"Tell me what you think. Please!"

"For Lady Lusca's sake you must wait until your stay in London is ended."

"Do you mean that?"

"Decidedly. When one starts being devastatingly honest with one's self it so often involves a disregard for other people's convenience. Walk out on Lady Lusca in the middle of the Season, and however anonymous you make your disappearance it will involve her in a lot of explanations, if not a downright scandal."

"Yes, I see that."

"You'll lose nothing by waiting. Let your honesty start there."

She spread her hands, then picked up her bag as though to go.

"Wait—there's just one thing." She looked surprised at the unusual urgency in his voice. "Listen, Jon . . . when you go to that place—Harbridge, was it?—where I can see you're determined to go . . . don't overdo the sacrifice. Can you understand what I mean? I'm afraid for you—afraid that in that mood of yours you'll fling yourself into a welter of poverty, hunger, toil, self-abnegation. A lab. assistant, you said. That's it . . . scouring, cleaning, at everybody's beck and call. It isn't right for you; it isn't necessary. Make them give you something worthy of you. Don't go out in the darkness. Make a proud career!"

With a queer, puzzled look in her eyes, she said, "I suppose if I have any ability it'll come out . . . but, Bagpipes, do you mean that you care what happens to me? Do you? . . . I can't believe it."

"Care what happens to you!" He was amazed. "You know—you know——"

Relief flooded her face.

"You mean that . . . and I thought I'd been nothing but a trouble to you. It's the loveliest thing that anybody ever said to me. You're so much more generous than I deserve——"

For the first time since he had known her he saw her confused of mind, genuinely unable to find words. Of all the complex people! He had always thought her self-important, and now he was forced to believe that in her heart was a touching humility, endearing, more pathetic than any story of distress.

She snapped her bag, put on her gloves, and held out her hand in farewell.

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"You must think me a colossal fool. I'm so relieved that's all over. . . ."

That's all over . . . but was it? Plans so feverishly made at two o'clock in the morning, completed in every detail, sealed with "that's all over" and a last beating of the pillow before the hot tired head was allowed to rest . . . plans so made had a way of returning the following night with bits chipped off their edges.

But not these—not these of Joanna's. She had put them into words, in broad daylight, and to the one person who would not tolerate anything that looked like vacillation. She had committed herself; she felt like a person who has climbed a mountain and seen the sun rise . . . triumphant if a little chilly.

"I'll come down with you," he said, "and get a taxi."

In the taxi she thought with self-reproach, He looks ill and I kept him talking and let him come down all those stairs. What a beast I am! Suddenly she pushed down the window and leaned out to look back, but he was not there, and the taxi flung her back upon the seat as it lurched round a corner.

III

On the third Saturday in June, Barbara Woodmyre, driving back from the half-term gymkhana with a crowd of happy children was in her element. A week after Victory Day, this was the local celebration.

At the gate of the paddock she pulled up the big open Buick to avoid running down a white-haired man in ancient tweeds worn with distinction.

"Hallo, Barbara!" he cried, turning a good-humoured old face made for smiling. "What a radiant picture you are, as good as a Midsummer morning. Anybody who didn't know you would swear you were not a year older than the rest of those excited children. I see your party has collected a goodly array of rosettes! A new idea, this Half-term Gymkhana."

"Yes, General, it was partly mine," said Barbara, with her wide smile, "but all the mothers were enthusiastic. We thought it would give the children something to do and pass the time until the Pony Club Gymkhana and the Horse Show in August. I hope we don't look disgustingly greedy; we've got six rosettes between us."

"Mummy won the driving class," piped Eileen, standing up in the back of the car in a gay polo-necked sweater of hunting

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yellow ; "and I was second in the best-child-and-pony-under-fourteen-hands."

"I was first in the Bending under-twelves," said Susan in her clear clipped voice, "and Gerald was simply marvellous ; he won the Open Jumping and he's only thirteen."

"Yes, it was rather terrific of Gerald," agreed Barbara. "We didn't think he had a chance really, but his most serious rival came to grief in the In-and-Out—horse started eating grass ; it was too, too funny. Oh it has been a gorgeous afternoon ! I've loved it."

She pushed back the fair, springy hair from her hot forehead, and boyishly wiped her hands on the thighs of her stained fawn breeches.

"How is Mrs. Oldcastle, General ? And why don't you bring her to see us at Keckwith ?"

The old man smiled.

"Well, now, Barbara, we're entirely to blame in that. You know how it is, you mean to visit friends and the time slips by."

"Then don't let it slip any longer. Come next week. The boys go back to school on Monday ; come on Tuesday and have tea. Andy's at home, by the way, and he's suddenly gone mad on fishing. You can give him the advice of an expert.' And you must put up with us as we are, General. Like everybody else in these days, my staff has practically faded away. Can Mrs. Oldcastle get housemaids ?"

"I don't know if you'd call them housemaids ; rather vague people who leave brushes on the front stairs. Not like they used to be."

Barbara gave an amused titter.

"Will you believe me, I'm doing all the cooking myself. There's old Norton who came with me from Darchingham, he has dreadful rheumatism, but he manfully does all kinds of things that would have been beneath his dignity ten years ago. I've got a couple of Austrian refugees, and a woman from the village every morning, and Nanny. If my mother knew she'd have apoplexy. I can just hear her saying, 'My dear, if you have the right butler and the right housekeeper you will never have to think of servant trouble, if I may use such a middle-class expression.'"

"And how is your very charming mother ?"

"Very well indeed. She's in London for the Season—from which Heaven defend me !—because she revels in meeting some of her old friends there and attending weddings. My sister-in-law is with her, such a darling girl."

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"Ah. Your brother's wife. Poor fellow . . . poor fellow. He loved the open air and laughter and horses, like you do."

"Yes . . . Hubert was very like me." She sighed. "But I must get these screaming imps home; their governess has very kindly gone in to prepare tea for our return. We're all ravenous. Ice cream and horses always make you famished, don't they? And we've had quite a lot of both to-day."

"I had four and a third ice-creams," said Caroline, of whom little could be seen but a face and two jodhpured legs.

"Why a third, young lady?"

"Well, the last one we divided, Roger and Eileen and I. We licked in turns."

"I didn't lick," said Susan righteously. "It was disgusting."

"Why, this one's almost a young man!" said the General, pointing to Gerald, in all the glory of his check jacket and immaculate stock.

"Yes, Gerald's going to Eton in September."

"That's splendid. And what are you interested in, my boy?"

"Horses," said Gerald. "I'm going to be a gentleman rider."

"Oh, you'll find lots of other things to fill your mind at Eton."

Gerald gave him a cold sceptical look and all the other children opened their mouths to speak, and politely shut them again.

"They're a hopeless crowd," said Barbara proudly.

"Well, well, we can only be young once. It's a grand time, and I remember what I was at this lad's age. The world was to me just a salmon river. Maturity comes all too quickly, though I must say it has laid a light hand on your bonny face, Barbara. Don't work too hard at your cookery."

"It isn't the cooking," said Barbara laughing, "so much as having eight horses to look after and only one absolute moron of a stable boy. Andy and he are bringing them home now, and we'll all be hard at work grooming and feeding before we so much as think of our own emptiness. It's a dog's life."

"But you wouldn't change it!"

"I certainly would not. Now don't forget—Tuesday at four o'clock."

"We shall come, and thank you very much."

Barbara waved gaily, letting in the clutch, and in a chorus of good-byes the overloaded Buick edged its way down the lane.

It was a brilliant summer afternoon, sunlight lying in golden swathes upon the hard white road, the verges white with Queen Anne's lace, the hedgerows densely green. Above, the branches

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of towering elms made a high checkered tunnel of leafy sprays and patches of blue sky. In the fields the corn was springing, and the standing grass shimmered and rippled with every breeze.

Soon the road skirted the home fields, and the car turned into the steep untidy drive of Keckwith Hall and drew up with a spirited curvet upon the gravel.

"Home!" shouted Barbara. "Out, children, and do, do mind the paint-work."

They streamed up the steps, waving their rosettes with clear, glad cries. Barbara's eyes followed them with candid pride. No more given to introspection than one of her own children, she actually did at that moment frame the thought that she was a very happy woman, and if happy then fortunate, and if fortunate then favoured. Swinging the door of the car with a carefree slam, she gazed round her little world of house and paddock and wood, steeped in sunshine and roofed with celestial blue; her wide mouth curled upwards in a smile of tender approval and she went bounding up the steps after the children, her bright hair glinting and on her face that innocent, alert look which had reminded Joanna of a friendly fox terrier.

Miss Lockhart, with furrowed brow, met her in the hall.

"There's a telegram for you, Lady Barbara. It came after you left, and I thought I'd better keep it. Here it is and . . . and the papers have come too."

"A telegram?" said Barbara, wiping her hands on her breeches with a schoolboy gesture. "For me? From the boys' school, I suppose." She tore the envelope and dropped it on the floor, unfolding the thin sheet of paper. "It's from London . . . what on earth? . . . 'Come as soon as you can. Mother.' . . . What does she mean?"

"The papers—the papers have come too," said Miss Lockhart nervously. "I think—I think perhaps it's—*this*."

Barbara snatched it from her and took one look at the headlines. The children, full of interest, flocked round and tried to read over her shoulder.

"Oh!" said Barbara. "Oh . . ."

Her face crumpled slowly, just like a child's; then broke, and she burst out crying. The children, astounded by the unprecedented sight, pressed up against her, pulled at her arms, cried, "Oh Mummy! Oh Nanny! Oh Miss Lockhart!" Caroline, the most highly strung of a normally tough crowd, began to scream. Miss Lockhart stood awkwardly, wringing her hands. There had never been a scene quite like it at Keckwith Hall.

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"Lady Barbara! Oh please, Lady Barbara! Oh dear, oh dear! Oh children! Oh dear me!" stammered Miss Lockhart.

Blue, scarlet, and gold rosettes of satin ribbon dropped unnoticed on the floor. For once, nobody was thinking about horses.

IV

Bane stood against the open window, gazing out across the glittering roofs of Kensington, where grey pigeons with ruffs of pink and green paraded in the triumph of a summer's morning.

His thoughts were all, What does this mean to her? How shall I see her? In this crisis, if I must act at once, what shall I do?

Behind him in the room, the child Moya, subdued because she had tried in vain to rouse his interest, cleared away the remains of his breakfast and staggered out behind a laden tray, with just one disappointed backward glance. Perhaps it was true what Mum had said to the next-door neighbour while shaking door-mats, that poor Mr. Bane hadn't never bin the same since that last illness of his. No constitution, he hadn't, said Mum. Gets a 'flu germ, and down he goes for a week, just like my poor husband (said Mum), and wore out something shocking. He uses his brain too much, said Mum, so you watch out and don't get too clever, Moya my girl, said Mum.

The inaction was more than he could bear; he gave an audible sigh, and crossing the room to his desk began to toss over papers, sketch blocks, letters, as though the slight effort of his hands would help him to think.

When a knock came at his door, he slammed the lid of the desk down lest anyone coming in should find him thus fiddling, wasting time.

It was only Blair Kirby, with a newspaper in his hand.

"Hullo, Bag!"

"Hullo!"

"You've seen this, of course?" He displayed his paper, folded back at a headline.

"Yes. It seems to be in all the papers."

"It's a glad surprise for that girl I told you about—the widow. These things do happen after a war."

"What does your paper say?"

"It's a sensational rag."

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"Let me see."

The headlines ran across two columns.

TITLED SQUADRON LEADER BELIEVED ALIVE

REPORTED DEAD 1945

*Incurable patient is Earl of Luscy,
says Belgian doctor.*

"I suppose there's room for error, but it's big news," said Blair.

His friend passed back the newspaper.

"Can't say I like that word, 'incurable'."

"No. May make things awkward for the family. What about the title now, I wonder!"

"What details does that rag give?"

"Let me see . . . oh yes . . . 'Sixty-two-year-old Doctor Théobald Salost of Devers-le-Haut, Belgium, has a patient in his private hospital whom he confidently states to be Squadron Leader the Earl of Luscy, previously reported killed when his 'plane crashed in Belgium in February, 1945. Lord Luscy who at the time of his supposed death was thirty-five years of age, left a widow but no heir. The title which dates from 1677 passed to a cousin who at present holds it. Lord Luscy was educated at Eton and Oxford, joined the Royal Air Force in 1939, and was in action as a pilot in the Battle of Britain.'"

"Go on."

"It just says, 'Doctor Salost is leaving for England with his charge.'"

"Charge!" He frowned, and added, "I should have told you. I know her . . . Joanna. You talked about her—that day."

"You know her! How did that come about?"

"I met her at the house. I've seen more of her since."

"You mean, she's a friend of yours? You subtle, secretive old——"

Bane went to the mantelpiece and searched for a packet of cigarettes behind the clock.

"A friend? It's difficult to say. Yes, there's friendship . . . and a kind of curiosity." He struck a match and watched the small flame. "I haven't known her long, but long enough to realise

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that she isn't an obvious person, that she has her problems." He applied the flame to the cigarette. "I always think of her as a person destined to be lonely. And now—this."

"They say she doesn't belong to the Lusca set. Came from France, didn't she?"

"Yes. She's a girl you could easily misjudge."

"I'm sorry if I've said anything——"

"Not at all."

When Kirby had gone, he stood against the mantelpiece with the cigarette burning itself away between his fingers. Since he first opened his *Times* that morning and read a more restrained version of the same story that the popular press revealed, his mind had followed its implications down long lanes of conjecture which eventually bogged themselves. On so dangerous a foundation imagination built alarming shapes. So, he was convinced as he turned the problem over and over, must she at this moment be building, never more bewildered and alone than now. If his thoughts had run fearfully ahead, what must hers have done? Perhaps she knew more, the more that was comforting or the more that was disquieting. Of one thing he was certain, that she had silently called to him for help; perhaps her last call for ever, as she went on into a future that would separate them as surely as that first chance meeting had brought them together.

It was clear to him now what he must do. He went downstairs to the telephone and dialled the taxi-rank. A very short time afterwards he was pressing the bell at the house in Henriques Place.

The old, rather melancholy butler looked at him, unwelcoming.

"Lady Lusca is not seeing anyone, sir. Those are my orders."

"I think she will see me."

"Sir?"

"I am sure she will see me. Please take her my message. I'll wait."

"Well . . . if you'll step inside, sir, I'll enquire whether her ladyship——"

He stood inside, in the silence of the hall. This did not seem like a lived-in house, so hushed and dim after the sunlight of the street.

The old man came painfully down the stairs.

"Her ladyship will see you. She is in her sitting-room, if you'll follow me, sir."

"Let me go alone." Bane smiled. "We're neither of us good on stairs."

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When he entered the room on the first floor where he had met Lady Lusca on earlier occasions, he thought that it was empty. The strong morning sunlight found its way through the muslin curtained windows and splashed its gold on the brown amber of the polished floor and the faded beauty of Persian rugs. A small walnut writing-desk stood open, and notepaper and envelopes were strewn upon it. Above the desk a shell-shaped arched recess held a classic statuette in luminous glass, and the interior was softly lighted by a hidden lamp. A bowl of mixed carnations stood on the small table at the foot of the sofa-divan piled with cushions of lavender velvet; their scent was sweet and had the refreshing tang of cloves.

Then he saw the old countess, standing with her back to a Venetian mirror which hung above the white Adam mantelpiece. He thought again how, slight and spare though she was, she had the same matchless distinction as an old and rare piece of china, ivory, or gold. The room seemed to contain her with the same sublimity of awe as the collector's room holds its greatest treasure, the jewelled triptych or the illumined missal.

Her small, handsome face was turned to him, rather haughty above the diamonds on the velvet neck-band.

"I didn't expect to see you, Mr. Bane. I gave orders that I was not to be disturbed this morning. Have you some important reason for wishing to see me?"

"The last time I was here," he said, "you asked me to call again."

Her eyes widened.

"I did. But this morning, of all times——"

"You think my call is out of place?"

She looked at him without smiling.

"You have heard the news?"

"That was why I thought it the right time. You will want to talk to someone, someone not of your own family . . . who doesn't matter—who is as impersonal as a piece of furniture. Why not to me?"

"You strange man!" She gave him a scrutinising look. "The telephone has been ringing for two hours, Esther sitting beside it, distracted. I told her to tell the exchange to put no more calls through. People mean to be kind, but one dreads their congratulations."

"That must be because your heart fears premature congratulations."

She made a gesture, baffled or impatient.

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"I was trying to write letters. Let me close my desk."

"Let me do it for you."

"Thank you."

She did not ask him to sit down, but remained standing herself. After a moment she said, "You never knew my son. The papers said very little, for which I was glad."

"So he is alive! After all these months."

"Yes. I am nervous. Perhaps I am too old for these things to happen to me."

"I only know what the newspapers told. How can the mistake have been made? Was not Lord Lusca's body discovered and buried?"

"There must have been many mistakes made during the war." Suddenly the tension in her slight figure seemed to relax; she sat down on a high-backed chair and laid her hands along the arms. "My son's body was supposed to have been discovered beside his wrecked plane by a party of soldiers—Royal Engineers, they say—I am confused by these modern Army names. They buried him there and then. The fighting was going backwards and forwards over that part of Belgium; everything was hasty and makeshift. They didn't even know where he had come from; actually he was more than a hundred miles away from his base."

"How did they prove his identity?"

"From several of his possessions that were strewn round. I believe his body was badly burned. His body? I mean, this man—not my son. It is so bewildering."

"You have all my sympathy and understanding, Lady Lusca."

She lifted her hands from the chair and let them fall.

"They sent some of his things home; papers they took from his body—charred, but identifiable. Photographs. A little mascot and a fountain pen. How can it not have been he?"

"On what grounds does this Belgian doctor claim his patient's identity? Do you know that yet?"

"We know more than the newspapers stated, of course. This doctor says he is confident that his patient is Lord Lusca."

"And what does Lord Lusca say himself?"

She moved restlessly in the chair.

"I am very forgetful. Please sit down, Mr. Bane. . . . We understand—that is, we are given to understand that my son is not in a condition to speak for himself. It is all very worrying. We can know nothing until he arrives."

"He is coming to England?"

"He is in England now. The newspapers were pre-dated."

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Our friend and solicitor, Mr. Thruppwood, has gone to meet—them, at Croydon aerodrome. The Belgian doctor and a nurse will be in attendance.”

“Lady Lusca, you will soon have your son again.”

“I hope so,” she said feverishly. “I hope so. There is a great deal that we can’t understand. Lord Lusca—the present Lord Lusca, I mean—was here last night, and we talked and conjectured until our heads ached.”

“Sixteen months! Why has nothing been heard of this before?”

“That is part of the mystery. This doctor seems to have had some purpose of his own to serve.”

Bane leaned forward.

“Lady Lusca, you are afraid of the condition in which you will find your son, aren’t you? You mustn’t be afraid; it will be all right. He’s still your son.”

Her eyes softened as she looked at him.

“How kind you are. Yes, I’m terribly afraid. I’ve been imagining things, but when I see him—when I see my Hubert——” She shook her head, tightening her fingers on the smooth arms of her chair. “It will be all right. I can’t believe it is true, that it is going to happen. Hubert coming home! But he is ill; I know he is very ill.”

“But alive after sixteen months. He can be cured.” As soon as he had said it, Bane saw again that printed word, “incurable.” He wished he had never spoken. He turned his head away, and there was a painful silence.

“In God’s mercy, yes,” said the countess.

She rose to her feet.

“Before to-day is over I shall have the answer to all my questions. Mr. Thruppwood should be back in London by noon.”

“He knows Lord Lusca well, of course.”

“Oh yes. Hubert could not have been met by a more trusted friend. Mr. Thruppwood has known him since he was a small baby, and was one of the last people to see him before he left London that February day after his leave. I shall soon be very angry with myself for all this needless anxiety.”

She held out her hand, and Bane took it in his for a moment.

“I hope you will have great joy before the day is over,” he said.

“Thank you,” she said. “And thank you for coming.”

As he moved to the door she said suddenly, “Would you like to speak to my daughter-in-law?”

He turned.

"What good do you think that would do?"

She smiled, rather wistfully.

"She needs wise words. Poor girl, you must think me selfish to be so occupied with my own anxiety when hers is even greater. If you will go down to the dining-room I will send her to you."

"You mustn't have too much faith in my wise words."

"I would risk more than a little."

He limped slowly down the thickly carpeted stairs, and sought the formal room which opened off the hall, where his painting was still hanging above the high mantelpiece under the ornately plastered moulding that bordered the ceiling. He stood for a moment in front of it, ruefully acknowledging it his masterpiece, never alas! to be challenged by his present work.

"Bagpipes!" said Joanna suddenly from the door.

Her voice was husky, and warm with relief after long pent-up emotion.

She turned and shut the door behind her.

He asked, "Did I do right to come? I knew you wanted me to."

"Oh, how did you know? Of course I wanted you to. Who else could I talk to?"

She drew out from the table two heavily carved chairs with high backs, the centre panels upholstered in parchment-coloured leather, gilded in a pattern of Tudor roses. They sat down, side by side, almost touching.

"When did you know?" she asked.

"It was in all the morning papers. I had to get into this house; I don't know now how I dared."

"You've won my mother-in-law's heart."

"I think she is a wonderful person. I've just had a long talk with her. What about you, Jon? Are you happy about this? Were you stunned when you heard?"

"Yes, I was stunned. It's marvellous that Hubert is alive. As for what it means to all of us, I've got to the stage where my brain refuses to work any more. I simply can't think straight; I have to keep putting my hands to my head for fear it will fly off, there's a dynamo throbbing inside it. I daren't look ahead and conjecture; I must just live in this moment, to-day. There it is—Hubert is alive and is coming home. Beyond that point I have not gone, even in thought. It's the only way to keep sane."

She got up suddenly and began to pace the floor.

"Do forgive this display of nerves, Bagpipes. I can't keep

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still." She walked back to him, and stood before him, looking at him intently. "What I can't get over is this; as soon as you take your life into your own hands—as I was trying to do, you remember—Fate seems to reverse your decisions in such a tremendous way that you can't even ask why. I thought I had got to the stage where nothing else *could* happen to me, except what I brought about by my own endeavours. That's why I'm so bewildered; you alone can understand."

"Isn't it the best solution, Jon?"

"For Hubert to come home? Oh, I suppose it is."

"You're talking about your husband."

"I know, I know. Do you think I sound callous? I'm not, not down in my heart, Bagpipes, but I'm so jumbled up and tangled up I don't know where to begin to sort out what I really feel. Have I got to start being *another* person now, and how shall I make a go of it? After I thought I'd found the way, too."

He took her clenched hand in his and gently opened the fingers.

"Sit down, Jon. . . . I believe that when you see your husband everything will become simple and clear."

"I hope with all my heart it will." She hesitated a moment, and said rather shakily, "I suppose he'll be a physical wreck. It has rather been implied, hasn't it? I mean, sixteen months in a hospital and no word, and now it is the doctor who is going to establish his identity. Hubert doesn't sound exactly operative, does he? He wasn't the sort to be passive, if he could help it. Underneath we're all worrying—and not putting it into words. Can you be reassuring about it, Bagpipes? What would you think?"

"He may have lost his memory."

"Yes." She accepted this thoughtfully. "It comes back, doesn't it? Sometimes by a shock . . . or old surroundings . . . or gradually with treatment. I suppose we must face it. If it's my job in life to look after him until he comes to himself again, then I'll do that gladly. At least I shall be useful."

"How do you account for his being found?" he asked, changing the subject. "And if this is Hubert, who was buried in his name?"

"Oh, it's all a complete mystery. The other man who was found beside the burned out plane was never identified by anyone who knew him, in fact, he was said to be burned beyond identification. But Hubert's things were found on him, strewn around him. And what was left of the plane was proved to be Hubert's plane. Mr. Thruppwood, who has spoken on the 'phone to this

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Belgian doctor, told me that the doctor discovered Hubert half-dead in a ditch on February 27th, 1945, two days after the plane is supposed to have disappeared. He was wearing the remains of a pilot's uniform, and in his pocket was Hubert's wallet and on his wrist was Hubert's gold watch. And now, of course, it appears that he really was Hubert, and in some inexplicable way the man who was buried was not Hubert. He must have been a passenger, though it was stated that Hubert flew alone. There must have been a great many of these war mysteries that will never be explained. We shall know the truth of all this when Hubert tells us himself. . . . Oh, I'm so tired ! ”

“ You never slept last night ? ”

“ No. I didn't go to bed until three, and then I couldn't bear the dark and lying still. I got up at five. You must think me very stupid and incoherent.”

He rose to his feet.

“ We won't talk any more, Jon—not now. It's too much for you.”

“ I want to talk—and yet I'm talking nonsense. We'd better stop. I don't know how to thank you for coming ; it makes me feel you stand by me.”

“ Of course I do.”

She leaned against the side of the high mantelpiece, and said suddenly, “ I wish you could be with me, when I meet him.”

“ That's impossible ! That's mad ! ” He was surprised at his own vehemence, at the way his nature revolted against the very idea, crying out hotly as though assaulted.

“ I know. That's what I mean . . . talking nonsense. When shall I see you again, Bagpipes ? ”

“ When can you see me again ? ”

She considered.

“ I'll come to the studio on Monday morning. If I can't manage it, I'll write.”

She preceded him into the hall. There was no chance for a final word, for Graystead was waiting there to open the door. Bane said a brief good-bye, and went out into the street. He walked for a little way and then mounted an already crowded bus. London looked newly painted, fresh, gay, exciting, as the old white buildings gleamed in the sunshine and hotel awnings fluttered their paint-box stripes under the azure sky. He had work to do ; he must concentrate.

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V

Simon, Lord Lusca, rose from the desk where for a long time he had been sitting, lost in thought, as the door opened to admit the tall, grey figure of the solicitor; Mr. Thruppwood of Thruppwood, Rosnett, and Baskerville, who knew more about the Lusca affairs than any individual member of the family.

The Earl's manner, as without formal greeting, he ushered the visitor into the room and indicated a chair, revealed the strain of the last few hours.

"Well? Did you meet them?"

"I met them, and they are now installed in a flat at the St. James' Park Hotel. The flats have a separate entrance in a side street, so it is all quite private."

"And how did you find—Hubert?"

The solicitor had an even, emotionless voice which reduced all his announcements to an unexciting level.

"I did not find Hubert at all."

"What do you mean?" The colour rushed to Simon's face. "That it isn't Hubert after all?"

"I didn't say that, Lord Lusca. I did not recognise Hubert, but there is not any reason why the doctor's patient should not be Hubert."

The flush remained on Simon's brow.

"Mr. Thruppwood, are you splitting hairs, or is this a kind of legal prevarication? Are you telling me you didn't recognise my cousin? What do you mean? You've known him all his life. Why didn't you recognise him?"

The solicitor put on a reassuring tone.

"There is a great deal to explain to you, Lord Lusca. This is very trying for you; I realise that. The affair is not going to be easy; I foresee unsuspected difficulties which when I set out this morning I did not anticipate. Doctor Théobald Salost is, I am glad to say, a sincere and responsible type of man whose only object is to help us, though his English is unreliable; we shall have to get somebody to deal with that. I know a French lawyer in Paris who will come and act as interpreter."

"Why did you not recognise Hubert?" asked Simon bluntly.

"The doctor's patient is greatly changed."

"He must be!" said Simon, drily. "But *unrecognisable*? Absurd. Explain yourself, Thruppwood."

The solicitor gave him a keen look.

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"I will explain first how I came face to face with the patient in a small waiting-room at the aerodrome. He was supported by the doctor and a male nurse, or attendant. He was of about Hubert's height, but bowed at the shoulders and knees. One leg, I am informed, has been amputated below the knee. His frame was emaciated. The doctor informs me that he is about thirty-six years of age."

"Go on. Go on. What happened when he saw you?"

"I cannot answer that question as it stands. The patient's left hand is also missing."

"Good God! What does he look like? Hubert's face, his eyes, expression?"

"This is difficult to explain, Lord Lusca. The poor fellow's face is without expression. I understand that the entire face was rebuilt—if you understand me—by the surgeon. Skin-grafting, re-moulding of features, have made it appear lifeless and unnatural."

"Terrible. Terrible. This is worse than we thought. But his eyes? Don't say that he is blind?"

"The doctor tells me that he is not blind, but his eyes are dull and the whites discoloured. The scalp was grafted, too, I understand, so there is only a little hair growing on the uninjured side, and that is greyish. Altogether a most pathetic sight."

Simon stood with his hands gripping the back of a chair. The gilt clock on the mantelpiece played a gentle silvery chime, and struck the hour of one.

"I'm beginning to understand what you said about not recognising—and yet it seems impossible. You who knew him as a child, and through all his life! I didn't know him so well, and yet nothing will convince me that I wouldn't have recognised a something . . . indefinable. Do you honestly aver that you did not do so?"

The solicitor drew in his lips, frowning.

"I can only speak the exact truth, Lord Lusca. There was nothing, no feature, no expression, no manner or air in that poor fellow that I could associate with Hubert as we remembered him. And yet I could not, I dare not say that he is not Hubert. The inescapable fact remains, he could be Hubert. There is no reason why the doctor should be wrong when he insists that his patient is Hubert, Lord Lusca."

Simon, leaning over a carved chair, struck the wood with his knuckles.

"But the man himself, Thruppwood. When he saw you, what did he do? Don't tell me that he didn't recognise *you*!"

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"He didn't recognise me, sir," said the solicitor. "His mind is gone."

"Oh heavens!" Simon thrust his hands into his pockets and began to pace the room. "That's the worst of all, I suppose? A mental as well as a physical wreck; and wreck in the most hideous sense. A monstrosity. That's it, isn't it, Thruppwood? A monstrosity."

"I have never had a more painful duty than to acknowledge that word, Lord Lusca."

The Earl turned abruptly.

"I suppose you had a conversation with the doctor. Did he offer proofs of Hubert's identity?"

"He gave me Hubert's gold wrist watch, the one his father gave him when he went to Oxford. Also Hubert's wallet, containing money, papers, identity card, and a photograph of his wife. These he took from the unconscious body of the man he found in a ditch a day or two after Hubert's plane crashed. The patient has never been able to speak for himself."

"How is it that this doctor kept quiet for so long?"

"Partly because for some time after he discovered Hubert his village was in German hands. Also he admits that he was not interested in his patient's identity, but only, as a professional man, in his injuries. He declares that when he found the airman in the ditch he was to all intents and purposes dead already. Salost restored him to life, brought him back from the dead, and therefore had a claim on him—so he states. I gather that he is a clever surgeon who has seen better days; he kept talking about his profession. It is certainly the first thing in his mind, his primary consideration."

"It all seems utterly hopeless to me. We were bewildered before, but we didn't contemplate anything as bad as this. What a shocking predicament for the family—and for me."

"Particularly for you, Lord Lusca. You have my sympathy."

"Can this poor fellow speak?"

"The doctor says that he has never spoken, though there is nothing wrong with his organs of speech. He can hear, for though he took no notice whatever of anything I said to him, he obeyed the doctor's instructions to stand, sit, walk. The doctor did his best to be helpful. He begged the patient to attend to me, to try to concentrate. There was absolutely no response."

"And what happens next, Thruppwood?"

"The next thing is for you to see him yourself. The other members of the family also. And we must have a long interview with the doctor and obtain all the details of his story."

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"Of one thing I am certain," said Simon, "that his mother will recognise him. However disfigured, a mother must recognise—if only by some spiritual affinity which she couldn't put into words—her son. And Hubert and his mother were particularly devoted. There is his wife, too, and his sister. It will be an ordeal for them, I'm afraid."

"It will be a most painful ordeal. For my part, I am pinning my hopes on some gleam of recognition when he sees—say, his wife." For once his even tone became a little ragged, as he said, "The ladies must be prepared. The poor fellow is a shocking sight."

"As bad as that?"

"Revolted."

"No! You horrify me." Simon's expression grew more grave. "Why has all this happened now? Why has the doctor suddenly come forward with his claim?"

"You must ask him that question yourself. It has not yet been explained."

"This is what is worrying me—supposing none of us recognise this fellow as Hubert? What then?"

The solicitor gave a nervous cough.

"In that case, the trouble begins, Lord Lusca. A claim has been made. It will have to be proved, or disproved. It would be better if a member of your family could say without a shadow of doubt, 'I know and have evidence to prove that this man is *not* Hubert.' Even that may be forthcoming."

"And what is my position in all this?"

"At the present moment you are still the Earl of Lusca. I can go no further than that. I have seen the claimant and am quite incapable of giving judgment for or against him. I'm sorry if I seem to have failed in clarifying the situation; fortunately there are others upon whom the responsibility falls with more promise of success."

"There will be expenses."

"The expenses will have to come out of the estate. I hope the affair will be settled quickly."

"My God, so do I! I never thought of anything like this. It will nearly destroy the poor old lady." Simon walked across to his desk. "The sooner we get this identification business over the better, of course. This afternoon at the hotel, I suppose. Would you like me to go over to Henriques Place and prepare the ladies, or will you take that in hand yourself?"

"I think Lady Lusca will expect me in person," said Mr. Thruppwood. "I know her well. You can rely on me. How is your wife?"

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"My wife's state of health," said Simon dryly, "will not prevent her from taking an active part in any family emergency. She only met Hubert twice, but she will not consider that her evidence is to be discounted for that reason."

A footman quietly opened the door and came into full view.

"Will you have luncheon served, my lord?"

"Luncheon!" Simon looked at the solicitor, in whom a faint stirring of interest has been aroused, and professionally suppressed.

"All right, Thruppwood," he said with resignation, "I suppose we've got to eat."

VI

At tea time on Sunday afternoon there was a noise of arrival in Henriques Place, and Barbara burst suddenly into the green drawing-room. The shadowed air which was heavy and rather melancholy began to swirl and dance; the atmosphere shivered and split into a thousand jagged fragments, as though someone had flung a stone into the centre of a mirror, so abrupt was the entry of Barbara.

Her cheeks held the ruddy tan of a summer in the country, and her eyes had a blazing blue intensity. She wore a wrenched felt hat on the back of her head, and a belted Burberry which announced itself with the smell of saddle soap.

"Where is he? Where's Hubert?" she cried at once, eagerly, imperiously, like a demanding child.

The cups and saucers of delicate Minton china, snowdrop-white with green veinings set on the silver tray, all seemed to jangle and set up a high, faint, jarring wail.

"Good afternoon, Barbara," said Lady Luscaý composedly. "So my telegram has brought you?"

"Yes. I only got it at six o'clock yesterday, and the newspapers at the same time. I'd been out all day with the children at a gymkhana. I caught the first train this morning. Is Hubert here?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Hubert is very ill indeed. . . ." My dear, you have not spoken to Joanna, and please take your things off. Joanna, ring for Proudfoot to take Barbara's things," said Lady Luscaý, looking with apprehension at her daughter's outfit. "Did you bring a maid?"

"No, I didn't. I haven't . . . oh Jon, I'm so sorry. How are you, my dear?" And Barbara warmly kissed her sister-in-law

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and then embraced her mother, who exclaimed, "You didn't travel alone!"

"Yes I did. Oh Mother, must you bother about things like that? Please tell me about Hubert, I can't wait. I only know what was in the newspapers."

She threw off her Burberry, revealing, not full riding kit, but strangely enough a printed silk dress, white on navy blue.

"What are you looking at me for, Mother?"

"Nothing, my dear," said the old lady dryly. "It did occur to me to wonder if you had come straight on from the gymkhana."

"I don't understand what you mean. I thought——"

"Well?"

"I thought you would all have been crazy with excitement about Hubert. What's the matter? He's not *dead*?"

In the silence that followed Barbara's ringing voice, Joanna said almost curtly, "It's as bad as it can be. You've got to know. He's in a terrible state. We—it's awful, Barbara—we can't recognise him."

"Oh poor Hubert!" cried Barbara in sharp distress. "They've starved him. He will get better, won't he?" She caught sight of her mother's face, and repeated anxiously, "Won't he?"

Lady Lusca put her hand to her eyes.

"Barbara, we have a tragedy to face. Hubert will never be again as we knew him. He is hopelessly——"

"What?"

"Disfigured . . . mutilated . . . changed."

"How awful. Hubert, like that! How awful."

"That isn't the worst," said Joanna, suddenly rising to her feet as though the strain of the moment had become unendurable. "He's insane, Barbara. Just a poor mindless creature, whom—whom we can't even recognise as Hubert."

"What do you mean? The colour had left Barbara's face.

Joanna looked dumbly at her mother-in-law. The old lady quietly clasped her hands together on her knee, the fingers working.

"Joanna has spoken for herself," she said, in a low controlled voice. "She is not speaking for me. I will not say that I cannot recognise my son; I will only say that something tells me the poor creature I saw yesterday is Hubert. Yes . . . I believe he is actually Hubert; *I do believe it.*"

The colour rushed back to Barbara's face; her eyes blazed and her mouth quivered.

"I don't understand you!" she cried, in a kind of frustrated

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anger. "I cannot—I cannot understand you, Mother . . . or you, Jon. You can't recognise Hubert, our own Hubert! Are you mad? Or don't you try——?"

"Barbara! Please!" Her mother's tones were compelling.

"Don't stop me, Mother; this is too serious. Are you actually telling me that you have seen Hubert—our darling Hubert—before you, and he was so altered that you didn't know him? Oh, it's absurd . . . impossible. It couldn't be—it couldn't . . ."

Joanna laid her folded arms along the mantelpiece and rested her head upon them, her face hidden.

"It's no good going on like that, Barbara," she said in a muffled voice. "I wouldn't have believed it myself, but it's true all the same. He may be Hubert—but we just don't know."

"I shall know," said Barbara in a stifled voice, as though she were going to cry.

"I hope you will. We all hope you will."

"Mother? You too?"

"Barbara, I've already told you, though I have tried and failed to recognise any physical feature of Hubert in this poor, cruelly wrecked man, I have put my faith in a spiritual bond and something draws me to him. I am almost sure that he is our Hubert."

"Almost!" Barbara flung herself into a chair. "Nothing will convince me that a mother can't recognise her own child. You say that this man is appallingly altered. I can't really understand what you mean by that, not knowing the facts; I suppose I shall understand later. All I know is this, that if one of my own children—or even Gerald—Gerald who isn't my own child but has lived with me as my child for four years—if Gerald were taken from me, ravaged by sickness, maimed, mutilated, disfigured until his own friends denied him, I should still know, the minute I set eyes on him. Nothing—nothing!—could deceive me."

The silence was broken only by the old lady's deep sigh. Joanna stood motionless, her face still hidden.

Barbara turned on her.

"Jon! Oh Jon! How can *you* not know?"

There was another painful silence. Then Joanna stood up.

"You'd better let me take you to your room, Barbara. I'll have some fresh tea sent there; you must be tired."

"Yes, go with Joanna," said Lady Lusca.

In the upper floor bedroom which Barbara always occupied when she came to London, Joanna sent the maid away and began herself to put out Barbara's brushes on the dressing-table.

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"Where is Hubert, Jon?"

"In a private flat at the St. James's Park Hotel. He has a doctor and a nurse with him."

"Couldn't he have come here, or to Carlton House Terrace?"

"Not very well. He's not fit."

Barbara sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Jon, is it nearly killing you?"

"The suspense isn't very easy to bear."

"It's been an anxious week-end for you."

"Terrible."

"When you saw him, did he really not know you?"

"He has no expression. His eyes are quite vacant."

"But was there *nothing*?"

"Nothing at all."

"I can't believe it."

"You will."

"But some Belgian doctor says he *is* Hubert. How does he know?"

"We haven't heard the doctor's story yet. He speaks very little English, and the interpreter, a friend of Mr. Thruppwood, doesn't arrive until to-morrow."

"When shall I see him—Hubert?"

"To-morrow, I suppose. We shall all keep on going to see him, on the chance that something may——"

"Remind us?"

"Yes."

"I must know him," said Barbara in a low determined voice, which broke as she added, "It must—it must be Hubert!"

VII

Bane was at work on a new job on Monday morning, designing book-jackets for new novels. He enjoyed the freedom of imagination which this work entailed, but grudged the time spent in reading the novels to capture what the publisher who commissioned him had called "the author's vision." It appeared that if the artist's vision clashed with or eclipsed the author's, the artist was considered the vandal. This made it essential to read more than the title and the first and last sentences of the novel.

As he read, failing to become interested, he realised that the drama of the Luscaï affair was more absorbing to him than any book. He went steadily to work, but he was all the time wonder-

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ing whether Joanna would come. He had put the studio door a little ajar, and every time he heard footsteps on the stairs he lifted his head and waited.

It was past twelve when she came. He had no need to ask ; the story of the last three days and nights was written in the sharper lines of her face, the stains of weariness under her eyes, the drawn-in corner of her lips, the droop of shoulders usually erect.

She gave him the smile of one who comes home after toil and disappointment, and walking across to the divan laid her hat upon it, and then slowly sat down.

He fastened and latched the door, and threw his brushes into a pot.

"What can I do for you?" he asked abruptly.

She opened her hands and looked at the palms.

"I don't know, Bagpipes. I just came . . . like coming up for air."

"How is he?"

She lifted her head and looked at him.

"How much do you know?"

"Quite a lot of it. Somebody told somebody else, who told my friend Kirby—you know how these things get round in town."

She shook her head.

"Couldn't be worse."

"Is it true that nobody recognises him?"

"There's nothing to recognise. It sounds impossible, doesn't it? It is impossible—and it's true."

"Did you try?"

"Try? Try? Oh Bagpipes, if you knew how I tried! I prayed to recognise him . . . I prayed that if he was Hubert, some little thing might happen, just lifting his hand in a certain way, or a sort of look fleeting across his face, so that I'd know. And nothing happened."

"What did the rest of the family think?"

"Simon said immediately, 'That is not Hubert, of course it isn't; nothing will persuade me that it is.'"

"Of course he—"

"Doesn't want it to be Hubert. You might as well be frank. How can Simon want to lose everything that Hubert's death brought to him! I couldn't talk like this in the family, but I can to you. Isabel supported Simon, naturally. My mother-in-law—oh, it was pathetic. She longed to claim him, and she couldn't. And then she said she looked for a spiritual bond, and found one; and every day now she becomes more and more

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convinced that he really is her son. You can put her definitely on his side. Barbara—Barbara Woodmyre, Hubert's sister—hasn't seen him yet; she is going with us to the hotel this afternoon. She was very fond of her brother. She is disappointed in us all, and thinks she can't fail to know him."

"And when will you have the doctor's story? That may be conclusive."

"To-night, I think. Mr. Thruppwood is bringing a French lawyer to interpret. We can hardly wait to hear the story. It really is nerve-racking, Bagpipes—you can't imagine."

"Oh yes I can. You look all in, Jon."

"Do I?" She looked up with a wan smile. "What an awful thing to say to a woman. It means she looks a fright."

"Not you. I know what you've gone through. Shall I tell you what I recommend?"

"What?"

"Let's not talk about it. Try not to think about it, just for an hour, Jon."

A little colour came into her face.

"Show me some pictures," she said. "You know my mother-in-law told you to!"

He brought her an album of coloured reproductions, and though at first she turned the pages over dutifully and with obvious effort, as if struggling to please him, he saw that she was gradually captured, absorbed. When she reached the last page she was looking more like herself, her face less shadowed.

"Perhaps they painted some of those pictures," she said, "to escape from sadness."

He sat on the edge of his work-table.

"You always reduce me to a state of wonder, Jon."

"What are you wondering now?" she asked, a little less apathetic.

"To be candid, like we have always been with one another—have I your permission to proceed?"

"Go on." Her eyes showed definite interest.

"This sadness which you imply, I can't help wondering whom it is for—for yourself? For poor Hubert? Or for the Lusca family, who must be going through it like the very devil."

She put up her hands to her hair, lifting it from her brow.

"I deserved that."

"What?"

"The slap at Jon Lewalter—wonderful Jon." She gave an ironical smile. "What a tonic you are to me . . . Manet, Cézanne,

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Matisse and Van Gogh, and then a left to the jaw of my self-esteem. That's what I've had this morning, and it seems to have worked. I feel fifty per cent. better already."

"You do?" he observed grimly. "Well, you're not getting away with it. You haven't answered my question—side-stepper! What's all this pain of yours? Self pity?"

She stood very quietly before him with her hands linked.

At last she said, "I haven't thought of myself. Whatever it means to me, I can take it. I just want it over; I want to know. One way or the other. If I'm not to be free, then that's my life; I'll have found my place at last. I don't hate the idea, Bagpipes; I don't dread it. It will be Darchingham, with him. He'll have his rooms, nurses, the comforts of his own home as long as he lives."

"And for you, the awful monotony!"

"But it will be my right place, don't you see that? The thing I've been meant all the time to do."

"Not even children."

"I'll find friends—somewhere."

(He thought, She won't have *me*. I shall never see her any more.)

She went on, "So it will be all right either way. I was so bewildered when I came, I couldn't think, but since I've been with you it is clearer."

"Either way?"

"I told you what I was going to do before this happened. My father's laboratory. I've wanted something like this to happen; a way marked out for me. Soon I shall know."

"Are they very sympathetic to you?"

"To me? Yes . . . but rather disappointed, I'm afraid. They seem to think a wife ought to know her own husband, the right sort of wife, I mean. Do you agree?"

"You had such a very little time with him, and——"

"Yes?"

"You confessed to me that you only knew each other superficially. The Luscays wouldn't realise that."

"It sounds rather bad now. Cheap. I suppose I was a superficial person and only capable of reaching the surface of Hubert's nature. There must have been a great deal more in him than I ever knew; I realise that when I hear his mother and sister talk about him. It makes me feel inadequate, and I can't make up for it now in any way that will reach him."

"You needn't reproach yourself," he said frankly. "You did have such a little time with him. That's sufficient reason."

"Is it?"

"Anyone would understand."

He lowered himself with clumsy care from the table.

"Shall I make some coffee?"

"Yes, do. It will be like the old times."

He called from the tiny kitchenette, "There's no milk. I forgot to bring it in. Look outside the door, there's a good girl."

She went to inspect, and shouted, "There isn't any here."

"No! Not again! That's the second time. I suspect the chartered accountant on the lower floor."

She laughed aloud.

"We'll have to have it black."

"Black as hate, sweet as love, and strong as death, as they say in Spain."

She strolled over to watch him work the little coffee-mill.

"I thought it was 'strong as love and sweet as death'."

"Very decadent of you, my dear Jon."

While the kettle was boiling he measured coffee into a brown jug, and then poured on the boiling water from a height so that it foamed in the jug. He tipped out a generous cupful and added two spoonfuls of sugar.

"There! Please drink that carefully. I've noticed in you a deplorable tendency to tip it down boiling hot. How you can——!"

She smiled.

"Mummy was always telling me the same thing. She used to warn me what it would do to my liver; but I can't help it. I must be asbestos-lined because I can drink it nearly straight out of the kettle."

With the cup in her hand she began to wander about the studio, stopping to examine one thing after another, quite without self-consciousness. To Bane watching her occurred the thought that as some people were said to be accident-prone—if there was any truth in that idea—so Jon must be the kind of person to whom things happened. Once her destiny had led her to adventure; now its course seemed to be towards a stagnant existence. How much did she realise, and how much did she care? So short a time ago she had tied up her past life in a neat packet and called it a dusty memory; in future she would make her own way, and it would be the hard way. Hard, but active, progressive. Never Jon without progress. And in reformation, in atonement, one expected progress . . . onwards . . . upwards . . . panting to attain the mountain top and lie in the sun, humble but warmed

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with achievement. There was no mystery about Jon's motives then, no grandeur either; the enigma of her personality was to be solved at last. Until this curious intervention of destiny, this almost melodramatic frustration. . . .

He said suddenly, "I have no idea what life is like in the stately homes of England."

She looked up suddenly, questioningly. Of course she could not have followed his train of thought.

"I was thinking," he said, "of you at Darchingham—wasn't that the name? Living in lonely splendour—you!"

"Lonely splendour!" she said, narrowing her eyes.

Yes, it was wrong; a negation of personality. Jon, away from the ordinary life of the world, to which she belonged, in a *milieu* to which she had neither been born nor inclined. Lonely splendour.

The unsaid words were in both their minds simultaneously; their eyes met with complete understanding. He was closer than he had ever been to her guarded spirit, and there was nothing now in her past, present, or future that he could not share.

She was still holding the empty cup in her hand. She put it down on the table, with a brief, "Thank you," and crossing to the divan picked up her hat.

"I'll tell you when anything happens," she said at the door.

"Will you tell Lady Lusca that you've seen me?"

"I don't think so. I can't come any more with Merle, after this."

When she was gone he tried again to concentrate on his work.

VIII

The Rolls waited in the side street beneath the windows of the St. James' Park Hotel, and in the Rolls sat Isabel, Countess of Lusca. She was not pleased at being kept waiting, for she had progressed quite a long way from the days when she was inclined to defer to her predecessors.

At last another car drove up, and there alighted from it the old countess, and Joanna, and Barbara. They did not apologise to Isabel for being late, which perhaps accounted for the edge on Isabel's voice as, in answer to her chauffeur's enquiry, she replied, "Wait? Of course you'll wait! I'm not attending an afternoon party."

"Hullo, Barbara," she went on, adjusting her social smile. "How are all the children? Don't look so surprised to see me

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here. All the modern doctors say that nothing you do or see has the slightest effect, and I believe them. Do for goodness sake let's get inside before a crowd collects."

Isabel, who had brought with her a footman and a maid as well as the chauffeur, looked very imposing. As it was a chilly day—though June—she wore a mink coat, and her saucer-shaped hat of amber velvet bore what appeared to be a complete bird of paradise, and an eye veil. Barbara was wearing a tweed coat and skirt, Joanna a grey one, and Lady Lusca the good unobtrusive black of her class and generation, so no passer-by would have given them a second glance.

They all went into the building and approached the lift, which bore a notice, "This elevator to convey three persons only," so Barbara obligingly offered to walk up the stairs. They re-assembled on the second floor, where they were met by Mr. Thruppwood and Doctor Eaton from Darchingham, who had attended Hubert since he had measles and fell off his first pony.

"How do you do, Lady Lusca . . . Lady Lusca . . . Lady Lusca . . . Lady Barbara," the lawyer greeted them.

"Hullo, Doctor Eaton," cried Barbara. "I'm awfully glad to see you here. You'll be able to help us, won't you?"

The old doctor looked embarrassed.

Barbara slid her arm into his confidently.

"Tell me, please, what do *you* think about Hubert?"

"Well, Lady Barbara——"

"Baba!"

"Baba, it's got me beaten. I've never known anything like it."

"You too! Say it's Hubert! It must be."

He shook his head.

"I can't say it is; I can't say it isn't."

Her candid eyes brimmed with tears.

"This way, Barbara," said her mother sharply.

They went into a small ante-room where a short, grey-haired, bearded man came forward to greet them, bowing but speechless.

"Good afternoon, Doctor Salost," said Lady Lusca. "You speak to him, Joanna. Tell him that the French lawyer, the interpreter, will be at Carlton House Terrace this evening."

"I can't imagine," said Isabel, "why we need an interpreter when Joanna speaks French as well as that little man does, and much better than the majority of Belgians I've encountered."

"It would be simply horrible for Jon to have to question him, Isabel," said Barbara. "Surely you can realise that."

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"But when we're all dying to ask questions . . . I always thought my own French was passable, but I can't understand half this man says."

Joanna was asking the Belgian doctor, "Is there any change?"

"None at all. I told you, there can be no change. I do not see how he can further recover any of his faculties."

"But I thought perhaps the London surroundings . . . the sight of us——"

"No, no. You are expecting the impossible."

"Ask him a few things for me," said Isabel. "Ask him——"

"Excuse me," interrupted Mr. Thruppwood, "I should prefer that Lady Luscaj made no more enquiries. I am anxious that a French lawyer should be present before Doctor Salost reveals anything. That is why we have waited. It would be better to wait a little longer, until this evening."

Joanna said, "I understand," and Isabel paled with annoyance. She pointedly turned her back on the lawyer, and said loudly to Barbara, "I suppose you were astonished when you heard what had happened. It must be lovely down in the country just now; I expect you hated leaving it. We must get together and talk about the children."

"I'd love to," said Barbara, falling for her favourite bait. "How are yours?"

"As a matter of fact," said Isabel casually, "they've all got measles. I had a letter from Nanny only this morning. She took them to a village *fête*—crowning the Rose Queen, or something—and they mixed with all the school-children, and this is what happens. I do *try* to believe in democracy."

Old Doctor Eaton found himself next to the lady who, for him, would always remain the one and only Countess of Luscaj.

"I am so glad to see you here," she said with a gentle smile.

"I'm very glad to be here, if it is of any comfort to you, dear Lady Luscaj," he said. "I came directly I got your telegram. Advancing years have compelled me to take a young partner, and on an occasion like this it is a relief to think I can walk out of the practice for a few days."

"Please tell me, Doctor Eaton—we have always relied so on your judgment—what do you think about poor Hubert?"

"You are calling him Hubert?"

"Is there any reason why I should not?"

"I thought you might have found it too painful to do so."

"If the affliction is not too painful for my son to endure," she

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said with dignity, "it should not be too painful for me to share. Have you examined the poor boy? Is there anything——?"

"Frankly, Lady Lusca, I cannot say. This poor fellow is about Hubert's height, build, and age."

An idea flashed into her head. She said quickly, "When he broke his leg—he was eleven at the time—and you set it . . . can you recognise that?"

He hesitated, as though loath to disappoint her.

"It was the left leg, Lady Lusca. A compound fracture of the tibia. This man's left leg has been amputated above the knee."

A spasm contracted her face.

"Doctor Eaton, would you have believed such a thing as this could happen? Have you ever known anything like it before?"

"Barbara has asked me a similar question, and I replied, never—meaning not in my own experience. But even in the 1914 war I believe there were similar cases. Only a small amount of facial surgery can completely alter a person's physiognomy, and here is more than a small amount. The man's face has been re-made by grafting and building up the features, and half the scalp too is grafted. All this, of course, would count for nothing if the mind was there. His original injuries must have been frightful. He cannot recognise you; he is past it."

"Doctor Eaton—can his condition never be improved?"

"I should say not. You could consult a brain specialist."

"We shall. We'll do everything. If only we could know it is for Hubert we are working . . . Do you consider Doctor Salost a competent man?"

"I think he is very competent indeed, and a clever surgeon. I shall be interested to hear his story, from a professional as well as a human point of view. Lady Lusca, I want you to know how deeply I sympathise with you in this trial—and with the whole family, but especially with you. When I first heard the news that Hubert was alive I anticipated nothing but rejoicing, certainly not a situation which makes such demands on your fortitude. You must forgive me for calling him Hubert instead of Lord Lusca; I think of him as a lad, galloping his pony past my house."

"Thank you," she smiled. "Of course he is Hubert to you."

"What a young blade he was! Producing a temperature of a hundred and four on the day he should have gone back to school. You called me up in a hurry, and when I arrived I guessed rightly that the rascal had been holding the thermometer under the hot tap."

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She turned on him a glance full of pain.

"All these memories! And can you not see anywhere a trace of that young rascal? If only you could . . . if only you could."

He shook his head sadly.

"If only I could. There is his young wife yonder. I must have a little chat with her."

"Pray do. You will find Joanna eager to help you . . . and yet you must remember they had a very short married life. Only a few weeks together out of four months of marriage."

"She must be greatly affected by all this."

"Yes, but she has great self-control."

Barbara came up to them.

"Mother, when are we going to see him?"

"Why shouldn't we sit down?" demanded Isabel.

The Belgian doctor left the room. Joanna stood by herself, her eyes fixed anxiously on the door.

Presently it opened and two male nurses in white coats came in, supporting a bowed and shuffling figure. The clothing hung grotesquely on the emaciated form; the artificial leg dragged a little. The head, one side of it bald and the other thinly covered with dull hair, was thrust forward from the bowed shoulders; two empty eyes stared from the scarred, white, mask-like face. One bony hand hung, limp as a puppet's, from its sleeve; the other was missing. The creature was repulsive; a dead thing that had been made to walk, a corpse that was not allowed the repose of death.

A sob broke from Barbara's lips. She was staring, one hand pressed to her cheek, horror and despair struggling with the hope that her eyes had lately held.

She turned to the doctor.

"I want to speak to him. May I?"

"Of course. That is what you have come for."

She forced herself to cross the floor to within a yard of the motionless figure. She strained her eyes to gaze into the awful face, the sunken, lifeless eyes.

"Hubert! Hubert!" she whispered.

There was no response. Tears ran down her cheeks.

The little Belgian doctor went up to her, reassuringly.

"He will notice me. Me he knows. *Voyez.*"

He gently patted the poor creature's shoulder.

"*Alors, Hubert, on vous demande. Voilà!*"

The head moved slowly from side to side. The faintest flicker came into the eyes, and died again.

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"He is not deaf, *vous comprenez*, but he understand not."

"You called him Hubert, and he knew his name!"

"But of course. I do always call him Hubair; that name he know."

"Regardless of whether it is his own or not," said Isabel suddenly. "This is such an impossible situation."

Barbara walked over to the window and stood with her back to the room.

"Speak to him, Joanna," said Lady Luscaý suddenly. "Can't you think of anything that will rouse him?"

Joanna stood, trying hard to look without revulsion into that hideous ravaged face. She forced her memory back to those sunny days at Quimper, the debonair gaiety of the Hubert she had first known.

"Shiny!" she called softly. "Oh Shiny, don't you remember Jon? Don't you remember when you tumbled out of the 'plane and said '*Ou Sweeje*?' and we laughed so much? Try and remember Paris, Shiny, and the fun we had. It's Jon here . . . Jon, Jon, Jon. Paris was free, and we got married, and they were dancing in the streets. Smile at me, Shiny, if you remember!"

The faintest glimmer of light seemed to struggle for a moment into the contracted eyes in their blood-shot sockets. It could have been the beginnings of recognition, or it could have been just that the gentle voice, suggesting warmth and kindness, had penetrated the grim loneliness of the submerged mind.

"He knew you, Jon!" breathed Lady Luscaý. "Did you see his face?"

"I would not call that recognition," said Mr. Thruppwood. "It was probably just a natural response to the realisation that somebody was speaking appealingly to him."

"It is more than he has done before."

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders.

"We must keep on hoping. But up to the present I see no justification——"

"I believe it was recognition," said Lady Luscaý, in tones that defied challenge.

"Oh, Mother, yes! Yes, you are right!" cried Barbara suddenly, coming to her mother's side and looking at Joanna for support. But Joanna gave her a blank look and turned away.

"There's nothing more to stay for. We may as well go," said Isabel, rising, to show that she knew all about the order of precedence and that now was the time to assert herself.

"Oh, poor fellow whoever he is!" said Barbara. "How

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dreadful to see us all staring at him, and to be so cut off and alone. Supposing he really understands and can't show it! How wretched he must feel, and there is nobody to love him any more—nobody who cares. . . ." Her ingenuous face was suddenly flooded with pity. Without hesitation she walked across the room; and on that impulse, unflinching, she put her arms around the mute, bowed figure in a warm embrace, and lovingly, tenderly, kissed the dead, disfigured face.

A gasp of amazement, of horrified surprise, went round the room. Barbara, with the smeared tears glistening on her cheeks, turned and walked away.

As they stood, rather shaken, waiting for the elevator, Lady Luscaÿ said quietly, "That was like Barbara. I should never have thought of doing it."

"Ugh!" said Isabel. "How could she!"

Joanna, clenching her fingers until the nails hurt her palms, told herself, "I ought to have thought of it. Why didn't I? How miserably inadequate I am."

She felt humbled in the presence of Barbara who could do a thing like that.

IX

Five men met that evening in Lord Luscaÿ's study; Simon himself, Doctor Eaton, Doctor Théobald Salost, Mr. Thruppwood, and the lawyer from Paris, M. de Fleurus. When introductions had been made they sat down in a semi-circle before the huge stone hearth into which had been cunningly inserted a modern fireplace. The June evening was unkindly cold.

"The field is yours, M. de Fleurus," said Mr. Thruppwood. "You know the position and what we want to hear. We shan't be able to follow you adequately, so if any question of particular interest arises perhaps you will kindly translate."

"If you are ready," said the French lawyer, "I will ask my shorthand clerk to come in. He will take down a verbatim report which can afterwards be typed out, translated, and copies made."

"Certainly. Have him brought in. Will he require a writing table?"

"No. He writes on his knee."

"You think of everything," said Simon dryly, flicking open a cabinet and pouring drinks.

The Belgian doctor sat nervously passing a long, delicate hand

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over his high, glossy forehead from which the grey hair was brushed backwards.

"Perhaps you will first tell us something about yourself and your medical career," suggested M. de Fleurus.

"Certainly, sir, I will." The Belgian was voluble by nature, and seemed to find relief in talking.

"My father was a surgeon of Brussels," he went on, "and I received my education there, as well as at Vienna and at the University of Lyons. I may say without boasting that I was successful in my studies, and as well as passing very high in my examinations I also won some open prizes. I was ambitious to become a great surgeon. But that was not to be"—he gave a wan, deprecating smile—"like other students before me I was imprudent enough to fall in love and marry before I had qualified. She was the daughter of one of my lecturers—no money. Soon there was a baby on the way; I took my degree, and was compelled to settle down in private practice and support my family instead of proceeding with advanced studies. My father was bitterly disappointed; he had foreseen a great future for me. By 1914 there were three children in my home; I was a hard-worked general practitioner. The war altered things for me; I was at that time longing for a change. I volunteered for service; and to make a long story short, two years later I found myself at the *Institut Chardelier* in Paris. Everyone knows Chardelier, the greatest plastic surgeon who ever lived; I need not describe his work. I can only say that working under him was the most magnificent experience of my life. I had three years of absorbing happiness; I learned his methods, his secrets. Then came the end of the war. Ah, if I had been free then . . . if I had had the money and time to devote to study and experiment. But no, it was all over. I had my family to support; I went back to my practice. But I still had one dream, one ambition, perhaps never to be realised. Years went by. Now my circumstances were altered. My wife died; my little girls were grown up, two married, one in a convent. My uncle, my father's brother, died at the age of ninety-one and left me a small fortune. It was wonderful; I could have my own hospital. A small one it was in the end; I built it at Devers-le-Haut in 1934. I took such patients as I chose: I made, without boasting, a name for myself. I was happy, but I longed for a case which would really test my skill, the kind of case which Chardelier had tackled in the war years. That did not come my way. Even the war which broke out in 1939 did not affect me much. I was too old for service, and when my country was over-run, the Germans did not bother me much;

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they had no need of my hospital, and it was too small to interest them in any case. And then——” He paused and looked round the room. “Is that enough? Have I explained myself clearly?”

“Quite, thank you. You are coming now to the main point of your story?”

“Yes, sir.”

The French lawyer looked at Mr. Thruppwood.

“Have you followed Doctor Salost’s story up to now?”

“Not very clearly, I’m afraid. What about you, Lord Lusca?”

“I’ll wait to the end and hear the translation.”

“Then shall we ask Doctor Salost to proceed?”

“Certainly.”

“*Alors, continuez, s’il vous plait.*”

“Thank you, gentlemen. I am coming now to the night of February 27th, 1945. I had better explain that since I was the only doctor in Devers-le Haut I did what I could during the war years to serve the local population. There had been a birth at a labourer’s cottage that afternoon. Remember I had no car, for there was no petrol. I had bicycled to the cottage early in the afternoon, about four miles by road, but when I was ready to return it was dark and I had no lamps for my bicycle. I, therefore, decided to walk home across the field path, cutting off about two miles of the journey. This field path, I should explain, is very little used in the winter; it leads from the village of Devers right to the forest, and beside the path which is raised up like a causeway, there is a deep ditch and a stream. After a while, as you know, the eyes grow accustomed to darkness and one can see surrounding objects. I had walked about a mile, pushing my cycle with difficulty over the rough path, when I saw a curious object in the ditch, half in and half out of the water. I was almost certain I saw the white oblong of a face. Yes, it was the body of a man, and when I had dragged him to the bank I was confident that he was already dead. I detected no heart-beat. I saw to my amazement that he was wearing a British flying jacket of leather lined with sheepskin, for at that time, remember, my village was still in the territory occupied by the Germans. Even in the dark I could tell that the body had not only sustained severe injuries, but having been in the water until it was sodden it was in an unspeakable condition. I laid it down, proceeded to my house, and brought back some of my men assistants. Eventually we carried the poor fellow to the hospital for examination. Imagine my amazement, my incredible astonishment, when I discovered in that shattered hulk, still burning, the flame of life, surely the feeblest flicker that

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ever kept a man's soul in his body. I was seized with the fiercest excitement ; an enthusiasm I had never known since my glorious Paris days. I would save this man's life ! I would snatch him back from the dead ! How I worked, how I worked upon him. And his injuries ? Monsieur, they almost baffle description. You are a layman, so I will speak as to a layman. To your English doctor, here, at any time I will give the fullest medical description. I judged that the body had been in the water about forty-eight hours. It was that of a man of about thirty-five years of age, well built, five feet ten inches in height. The face and head were severely burned, and exposure and neglect had so inflamed the wounds that even then I doubt whether the poor fellow's own relatives would have recognised him. A wound in the left leg, probably not severe when inflicted, had become gangrenous ; in the same way, the crushed left hand. Both had to be amputated."

"Tell me again," interrupted the lawyer ; "what did you say he was wearing ?"

"A British flying jacket of leather, sir."

"How did you know it was a British flying jacket ?"

The doctor smiled.

"Well, sir, we had seen them before. Perhaps, a little, we had been able to help."

"I see. And was he wearing leather thigh boots ?"

"No. He was wearing trousers of cloth. They were sodden and black, but so far as I could see, not burned."

"Were they British Air Force blue trousers ?"

"I don't know. They were taken away and destroyed."

"Destroyed ! That was very negligent."

"Yes, sir."

"The flying jacket. Where is that ?"

"You may see that."

"Does it bear any name or number ?"

"It bears the number 29234."

The lawyer turned to Lord Lusca y, and said in English, "The number 29234, does that convey anything to you ?"

"Yes," said Simon. "That was Hubert's number."

"Please go on, Doctor Salost. How did you account for the presence of this injured man in the ditch ?"

"Oh, that was easy. We had heard that two or three days before a British plane crashed in the forest. I guessed that this was the pilot or a member of the crew."

"Crew ? Lord Lusca y's plane was a fighter, and he is supposed to have flown alone."

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"I know nothing of that."

"Did you try to identify your patient?"

The Belgian doctor said quietly, "No, I did not."

"That is unusual. Why not?"

"Because I didn't want to. I wanted him to remain so far as I was concerned an unknown man. A patient for me, the case I had been waiting for. After all, but for me he was dead; I had brought him back from the dead. For the present I claimed him. His jacket I ordered to be kept, but I did not examine it. A watch unstrapped from his left wrist before amputation, I flung into my own private desk. Then I operated upon his head and face."

"A moment, please. Do you believe that, but for the long immersion in wintry cold water, this man could have been restored to normality?"

"It is possible. If the facial burns had been taken in time, who knows——? The other injuries, too, were terribly aggravated by the cold and exposure. He lived, believe me it was a miracle, through the pneumonia which followed."

"It was a miracle. What a constitution the man must have had!"

"For a month I hardly left his side, except for regulated hours of sleep, and even then I was on call. I put my best nurses on the case, two of them were at his bed night and day. With every scientific aid we battled for his life. I was so engrossed and excited I could think of nothing else but the outcome of all my work upon him. For twelve months he lay in bed; then there gradually rose to his feet the man you see to-day."

"A living tragedy!"

"Well . . . in a way, yes. It was a pity that the mind could not stand the strain."

"As you say, a pity. And why, at that stage, did you suddenly begin to concern yourself with your patient's identity?"

"Well, sir——"

"Why not be frank? You were tired of him, you had no further use for him and wished if possible to be rid of him."

"I acknowledge it. I had done all I could for him and could do no more, however long he remained with us."

"So you examined his effects?"

"I made them bring me his flying jacket. In the pocket I found a wallet containing a large sum of money, papers, and an identity card. I was surprised to find that my patient was a British nobleman, the Earl of Luscy. I then examined the watch, and found on the inside of the lid an inscription stating that the watch

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was presented to Hubert, Viscount Lormain, by his father. I do not understand your English titles."

"There would be a photograph on the Service identity card. Could you recognise your patient from it?"

"No one could have done so. When I found him his face was inflamed and swollen beyond recognition. But it never occurred to me to doubt that my patient was other than the man described on the identity card he carried. Such particulars as I had been able to note corresponded, you understand. At the time I discovered his identity the British authorities were seeking for news of disappeared airmen in Belgium and Holland, and I quickly made contact with them."

"You can bring witnesses to confirm all this, if necessary?"

"Certainly. Several doctors who saw him while I was treating him, and my staff who are all of irreproachable integrity. No medical man or surgeon on earth could have done more for him than I did; I think that in any other hands he must have died. My only fault has been in not revealing his identity months before, and I cannot see what good that could have done."

"It might have made it easier to trace the identity of the second man whom we have to consider. The man who was buried as Lord Lusca. . . . Is that all you have to tell us?"

"Apart from any questions you may wish to ask."

The lawyer turned and bowed to Mr. Thruppwood.

"I shall now ask my clerk to make his translation."

After a moment's thought, he asked the Belgian, "Were your patient's original injuries such as he would have received in a plane crash?"

"Certainly they were. I heard afterwards that the plane was burnt out, but my patient had escaped with burns only on the head and face, shoulders and upper part of the body. There was nothing inconsistent in that. I did not account for the other injuries, but they were such as could be sustained in the accident."

"Another question. How far from the scene of the plane crash did you find the body in the ditch?"

"It would be about three miles from the forest. I do not know the exact site of the plane crash."

"How do you suppose that this man walked three miles with such injuries?"

"Not only would the injuries be much less severe before his exposure to cold and submersion, but it is surprising how far a

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man can travel when injuries are freshly inflicted. His object must have been to get away and find shelter. In the last war I have known men crawl for miles with shattered limbs and concussion."

"Had this man concussion?"

"Undoubtedly. He had either received a blow on the head or had fallen upon it. I conjecture that he had walked along the field path until he collapsed, falling down into the water, or rather rolling down the bank and coming to rest feet first, his head and shoulders out of the stream."

"And after that, did you hear anything more about the plane crash? Did you hear about this man who was buried?"

"I heard nothing more. I heard of no other man; I was too busy."

"Can you think of anything else to tell us?"

"Just at present, no."

"Thank you, Doctor Salost. We will wait now for the translation. Then there will be questions from all these gentlemen."

For a short time there was the rattle of a typewriter. The carbon sheets were passed round. Everybody seemed to be talking at once . . . reading . . . commenting . . . questioning.

"Well, that's that," said Simon loudly, and wondered whether his remark sounded inane.

They could well do without him now and he needed air. He left the room, and the man-servant hovering outside the door asked whether anything was wanted.

"Where is her ladyship?"

"Her ladyship—their ladyships—are in the small drawing-room."

"Ah," said Simon.

The small drawing-room, which was panelled in a peculiarly old-fashioned shade of red watered silk and furnished with heavily carved black Bombay furniture, was a room which Isabel hated. There must be something symbolic in the fact that she had chosen it as a suitable setting for a family occasion such as this. As Simon was going downstairs he pictured them all sitting there, waiting for him, waiting for something to happen, something to be said.

X

"So they talked all night," said Joanna, "and in the morning they knew no more than when they began. There's nothing—nothing you can get hold of. Oh, Bagpipes, are we crazy? Can you see any sense in it?"

"Why ask me?" he said. "My dear, I wish it made sense."

She stood by the back window of the studio, looking out across the gleaming roof-tops where the soft smoke-veils of London swirled under the high, pale sky.

"What happens now?" he asked.

"You may well ask! They're bringing more witnesses; two doctors from Belgium, some nurses, officers from his squadron, the men—if they can locate them—who buried—Hubert."

He looked at her sharply, then turned away and went on with some work he was doing. After a few moments he sat back in his chair, drove his hands into his pockets, and said, "There are some things you know now. For instance, that there are two men involved; the one who is living and the one who died in that plane crash. One of them was your husband. You know, too, that he didn't fly alone."

"They said at his airfield that he had no passenger or co-pilot."

"They said a lot of things at airfields in Belgium in February, 1945, I'll be bound. He may have taken off alone; he may have made a landing on another field. Somewhere between where he took off and the forest of Devers he acquired a passenger. Then the crash. One man was killed; the other, less badly burned and injured, made off along the path that led out of the forest to the fields."

She said without turning round. "Why do you think he was wearing Hubert's flying jacket?"

"I suppose he took that from the dead man's body. Did you ever hear what clothing the dead man was wearing when the R.E.'s found him?"

"Only that most of his clothing was burned off. That doesn't sound as though he was wearing a flying jacket of leather. So you think the other man stole it?"

"Not necessarily. He was the living man who needed it to replace his own, which was probably lost in the wreck of the plane since no possessions of a second man—no papers or anything were found."

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"Perhaps the second man wanted to lose his identity and buried his own things in the wreck of the plane."

"That's always possible."

"Hubert's watch, too . . . he was wearing that."

"Give him his due. It would be quite usual to take the valuables from the body of a dead companion, to forward them afterwards with details of the crash. You realise this is all wrong, don't you, Jon?"

"Wrong? Why?"

"Because you are taking it for granted that the man who died was Hubert; not the other."

She was silent for a long time; then she said, "You must think I am showing up very badly in all this."

"I don't think that."

"I shan't shirk the truth, you know, if it comes; but if it would only *come*. . . ."

"I understand."

She walked up and down the room, and then said with a nervous quiver in her voice, "They've asked me hundreds of questions. I've answered as well as I could, but it was hopeless. It just showed me how little I really knew about Hubert. The doctors . . . the lawyers. Distinguishing marks! You know, you just don't think about such things. Have average people distinguishing marks? That bit in the passport always used to make me laugh. If his mother, and the doctor who attended him from childhood didn't know of any, how should I? I made myself scrutinise him, though it was sickening . . . that map of blue cicatrices that was his face. If there had been a square inch of Hubert I think it would have spoken up and told me it was there. Do you think I'm talking unreasonably?"

"No. You're too fair-minded a person."

"Thank you for that . . . Mr. Thruppwood scared me to death when he came along with a pair of cuff-links. Did I recognise them? He didn't tell me at first, but, of course, the Belgian doctor had handed them over. They were perfectly plain square silver ones. How could I say I recognised them? Hubert had dozens of pairs of cuff-links, and I think he had some plain square silver ones; though these looked rather worn . . . but, of course, he might have been wearing them a lot over there. I don't know what he wore when he was flying. They asked me whether he wore a wedding ring . . . he didn't, so that was no go. Then the dentist business . . . that had all to be gone into. This man has quite good teeth; so had Hubert. This man had two back

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molars filled, but the trouble is that Hubert hadn't been to a dentist for years and nobody knows what he'd had done when he did go, or whom he went to. There's a lot of investigation to be done on that line. . . . Am I talking too much ? ”

“ Not too much for me, if it does you good. ”

“ I think it does. Last night I lay awake wondering who this other man could be. Just a missing airman . . . there must have been scores of them unaccounted for at that time. If only it could all have come out at the time it happened. That Doctor Salost ! ”

“ Perhaps if the case were given plenty of publicity somebody might be able to account for the other man. Nothing has appeared in the newspapers. ”

“ No . . . Simon is seeing to that. Since that first day there hasn't been a word. I suppose some day it will break wide open. ”

“ All the better. ”

“ I think I agree. It will be a horror to the family. ”

He pulled forward a chair.

“ Come and sit down. You'll wear yourself out, walking, standing. ”

“ I'm one of those people who always feels better on her feet. ” She smiled nevertheless and sat down in the chair.

“ Would it be wrong to try and forget everything for an hour ? ”

“ Wrong ! It would be perfect rest for you. I wish you'd try. ”

“ Tell me what you're doing nowadays. ”

“ Working on a new line of country. Sit still and I'll show you. ” He opened a portfolio and began to sort out sketches and finished work.

“ Do you like these ? You'll probably think there's too much colour in them. Poster paint. Commerical stuff. . . . Oh, you *would* get up ! ”

She crossed over to the table and looked at his work.

“ Oh, I like that. What is it for ? ”

“ A book-jacket for a novel. ”

“ I should like to read the novel. Is it about an island in a lake ? ”

He smiled.

“ Sorry to disappoint you, but it is not. The picture is symbolic. ”

She took it up between her hands and looked at it with a kind of loving intensity.

“ A green island in a lake of silver water . . . oh, it is beautiful. ”

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I can feel the peace of it." She turned her gaze on him. "This is—it, isn't it? Just as you remember it."

"Yes."

"You loved it, really, or you couldn't have painted this." She laid the sketch down. "It makes me want to be there, coming down to the water's edge between those silver birches."

He forced a casual laugh.

"Don't be morbid. In the old days the island in the loch was the family burying place."

She looked at him over her shoulder.

"That's appropriate. You might find something to bury there."

When she was gone he thought how worn she looked; perhaps the least demonstrative of the Lusca crowd, she was inclined to take more than her share of the strain.

Actually at that moment any strain which was apparent was being endured by Isabel, who had come to the conclusion that she could not endure Barbara Woodmyre any longer. Though upon the heights of tragedy a family may be drawn together in mutual sympathy, the lower altitudes of family relationships involve a host of irritations.

Barbara's clear voice, more accustomed to the wide spaces of open fields than to the cloistered stillness of a London mansion, had soared from the hall—where she was putting on her gloves—up the great well of the staircase, and through the gap in the white double doors of Isabel's own sitting-room.

"I don't know how Isabel can leave her children for the whole summer, just to come to London to enjoy herself!"

It had taken Isabel, still quick and light on her feet, about ten seconds to float along the gallery and down the main staircase. The astonished Barbara got her answer out of the blue.

"It's good for them. Keeps them from getting tired of me."

"Isabel! You know I——"

"And as for enjoying myself, I question that. I missed the Victory ball, and the gayest thing I've been to was a luncheon at 10, Downing Street, where I sat next to an eighty-year-old South American diplomat who couldn't speak—only snuffle—and in another month I've got to go back to Darchingham, because there's a stupid family prejudice in favour of the heir being born there. And if it comes to that, I don't even know if it's going to be the heir. . . . Enjoy, my foot."

"Oh dear," said Barbara. "I'm terribly sorry, Isabel."

"So you should be," said Isabel. "What about your own children while you're away—falling off their ponies, no doubt,

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and breaking their hocks or their pasterns or whatever it is they have underneath their jodhpurs."

"Oh, they wouldn't fall off *horses*," said Barbara simply. "They're far too old hands for that. But I really am worried about the new Nannie. She isn't a bit careful about making them change their vests when they get hot with riding. You see, the children she was with before didn't have ponies."

"Didn't they?" said Isabel with devastating aplomb. "What was the matter with them? Were they lepers or something?"

"Oh, I don't think they were *bad* people," said Barbara; "not really."

"And five minutes later," said Isabel, recounting the incident to her husband, "she was down in the housekeeper's room with tears in her eyes, begging Mrs. Sibbles to get her a cook, and Sibbles not only promised to do so but threw in a bevy of housemaids as well; whereupon Barbara, on the strength of it came and invited our children—bar Charlotte—to go and stay with hers for the whole of August. What shall we do?"

"Let them," said Simon, shortly, to end the conversation, the domestic chatter; for in the ten days since this affair of Hubert broke upon the family he had passed from the stage of solicitude, through anxiety, to the verge of irascibility.

As he walked about the magnificent house where kings had dined, and where the great figures of Victorian and Edwardian society had been lavishly entertained, up the grand staircase, along the marble gallery, under the huge crystal chandeliers, he felt as though he were accompanied by a ghost. And worse than a ghost. by the shattered, repulsive shape of something that still lived, a perpetual challenge, a constant. Here I am . . . you can't forget me. . . . what are you going to do about me? . . . make up your mind . . . make up your mind. . . .

His irritation extended itself to those other members of the family who had somehow always spiritually disputed his position of supreme head. The old woman, for instance, who still walked into his houses as though she owned them and he were the tenant. Those grand dames of the early part of the century, severely trained to dominate, to endure, to be gallant, stoical, self-possessed, and above all to expect their wishes to over-ride every possible inconvenience that dared to occur—they were unshakable. He could have got along too without Barbara, on the surface schoolgirlishly candid, ingenuous, and kind, but underneath a Luscy to the very marrow; tenacious, arrogant, a terrier with hackles up and teeth bared when it came to guarding her

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own little world. Joanna too, still a stranger, a bit of a mystery, who had never quite belonged to the clan, but who yet might walk in over all their heads and show what she was made of. Woman-ridden . . . hag-ridden . . . that's what he was. One man in a family of women. There was Isabel his wife, quite ready to get on with her job if they would only give her the chance, but under her bluster still a little afraid of the faction in Henriques Place. And those four little round-eyed girls—potential hag-riders—in the nursery at Darchingham! One man in a family of women.

He said to the lawyer, voicing one irritation, "That hotel suite at thirty pounds a week, the estate is standing that, I suppose. I'm not a millionaire, you know. Doctors, nurses, all these people to keep and fee. God knows what that's costing. I take it for granted—I don't know why I should because I've been let down before—but I'm taking it for granted that you're keeping an eye on it."

"Naturally, Lord Lusca." "

"Well, what's going to happen? How long is it going on? Is it necessary?" "

Mr. Thruppwood coughed, and considered.

"Well . . . we've got the evidence of all these people; it is for us to sift it. They can be reassembled at any time."

"Sift! What in heaven's name have you been doing for the last ten days?" "

"Ten days is a very short time."

"That's comparative. Ten days in the dentist's chair——"

"Since you have mentioned the matter, Lord Lusca, I can tell you that Doctor Salost is anxious to return to Belgium. I didn't know how you would take the suggestion. We know everything he has to tell us; he can't do any more if he stays a year."

"And he's fed up with the whole show, that's obvious. Well, let him go."

"We could always get him again."

"Again! You keep harping on 'again'. I suppose this show is going on for ever!" "

"It is very disconcerting to have to agree with you."

"And the others . . . your man, de Fleurus, is he still here?" "

"He would be glad to return to Paris."

"And those other doctors, and the nurses . . ."

"They can all go back, when you have made other arrangements."

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Simon, who had been walking up and down the room, stood still with his back to the writing table and his hands behind him, gripping the edge.

"Now what is the position, Thruppwood?"

"Well . . . quite simply, the patient. What are you going to do with him?"

"You mean, that with nothing proved, he's our responsibility?"

"As head of the family you might care to make the first suggestion."

"Head of the family? Well, the old lady will have something to say to that. Ten days and we've got no further, and so far as anybody can see there isn't the slightest chance of getting any further if this state of affairs continues for ten weeks or ten years. If I thought there was going to be a solution in a week—or a month—I'd say, keep the whole circus going and let's get the thing decided and done with, one way or the other. But it's a hopeless impasse, and you know it."

The lawyer gave him a bleak, concurring glance.

"Supposing," said Simon, "that I repudiate responsibility?"

The lawyer arched his eyebrows.

"This fellow, at the moment, is an anonymous war casualty. He's a Government responsibility. There are homes for such cases," said Simon.

"It isn't so simple as that, Lord Lusca. It has been claimed on this man's behalf that he is—I beg your pardon—the Earl of Lusca. Evidence to support this claim has been produced, and witnesses are prepared to swear to its veracity. There is at the moment no material evidence whatever for denying the claim. Therefore pending a more advanced examination it is only right that the Lusca family should assume responsibility for the patient and cause him to be cared for and supported in a manner that befits his possible identity. I speak as the family's legal adviser for nearly forty years."

"What's your idea, then? More doctors, more nurses, and a thirty pound suite at a West End hotel running on for ever?"

"I was not thinking of that. Perhaps Lady Lusca may have a suggestion."

"You mean my wife?" said Simon, maliciously misleading.

"I was referring to the dowager Lady Lusca."

"Then say so another time. There are three of them running around at the moment which is at least one too many. Yes, I

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don't doubt that Constance will enjoy managing the whole thing. But I'll have some economy exercised, Thruppwood, and I'll rely on you to see to it."

He waited for a moment to let this remark sink in, and then added with a hint of apprehension in his tone, "What did you mean just now, when you talked about a more advanced examination?"

A light of battle, of not unjoyful anticipation, gleamed in the lawyer's eyes. He removed his glasses and polished them.

"It will make an incredible sensation in the highest legal circles," he said. "There won't have been a case like it since the Thaw claimant."

XI

"You can't get away from it," said Barbara, "that he recognised Joanna. I'll swear to that as long as I live."

They were assembled in Isabel's own sitting-room. She had intended to have it re-decorated, but there hadn't been time, so it still looked as it had looked for the last forty years, like a stage setting for "Lady Windermere's Fan."

"I've seen him four times since then," said Joanna wearily, "and he hasn't shown the slightest sign of recognising me, or you, or anybody, Barbara."

"Mother agrees with me."

"I know. We've gone into that so many times before."

"Let's come to the point," said Simon. "What are we here for? Four days ago I told Thruppwood that the hotel arrangement would shortly be coming to an end. We needn't go into that; you've heard about it. Now Salost and his staff want to return to Belgium the day after to-morrow. We've got the patient on our hands; what do we intend to do with him?"

"I can hardly think, Simon," said Lady Lusca, frigidly, "that you have gone so far in your calculations without having plans of your own. May we ask what they are?"

He bowed, with a kind of feigned subservience.

"My possible plans have very little to do with it. I would rather hear your own proposition. Only I implore you to remember that the estate bears the expense, and I need not tell you that we are not millionaires. We can't stand any heavy drain without crippling ourselves. A hundred pounds a week, which is what the present arrangement is costing us, is out of the question."

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"I feel degraded," said Lady Lusca, "at hearing my son's affairs reduced to cold pounds, shillings, and pence."

"You've never had to think of pounds, shillings, and pence," Simon pointed out. "I have, and always shall have, the way things are going on. This is 1946, not 1905. If you would spend an hour with me at the estate office, going over the accounts, you'd have apoplexy."

"I have never been inside the estate office in my life, and I am only too distressingly aware of the deterioration of this century; you needn't point it out to me. At the same time, if you are seeking a practical solution, there is a small house on the Darchingham estate, Shornby Manor, which is empty and could be fitted up and staffed. I am willing to return to the Dower House immediately to supervise. I am also willing to bear the initial outlay from my private purse. It is, as you know, not a full one, but if there is to be economising I prefer to achieve that in my own domestic arrangements, not in the provision I make for Hubert's comfort."

"That's all very well," said Isabel, "but Simon is just being tactful enough not to put it into words that your ideas are too big. It isn't going to run to a house, an establishment, at all. You talk about Shornby Manor as if it was just walk in and sit down to dinner. What with renovating, furnishing, staffing, and running, it's going to cost thousands. In these days people don't start up houses every time they want a shelter for this relative and that relative. This is 1946, not 1905."

"If anybody says that to Mother again," said Barbara, "I shall stop *trying* to help."

Isabel gave her what was intended to be a quelling look, and went on, "If you ask me, the thing to do is to find a good, private Home where they take those cases. He could have his own suite and personal servant for about fifteen guineas a week inclusive. What do you think, Joanna? You sit there saying nothing, and after all it's more your affair than it is mine."

(Is it? she thought with surprise, suddenly coming down to earth. . . . I suppose it is. But she had never felt more utterly detached from the family than now when her whole future was in the balance, when she should be most keenly alive to her own interests. But how little she seemed to care for her own interests! Either her faculties were becoming dull with advancing years, or else it was the apathy of one too long imprisoned in alien surroundings, forgetting by now how to live, forgetting almost how to feel.)

Asked for an opinion, she knew that she must be non-committal. Though reason sided her with Isabel she could not appear to

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disagree with her mother-in-law. That would require too much subsequent living down.

She said, "He will have to be put in the care of a doctor. Why not get a doctor's opinion on the best kind of care for him?"

"It all depends on the doctor," said Barbara, pushing back her springy, fair, uncovered hair. "I don't think that Belgian cared enough about him, in fact quite frankly he didn't. He just regarded Hubert as a case, and when he couldn't do any more work on the 'case' he was all for dropping it and getting back to his own concerns. We ought to have the best doctor available, and one who really does care. I just cry and cry every time I see that poor boy; he looks so dreadfully ill and I'm sure he's getting worse and weaker. He doesn't even stand up by himself now; he hangs on the attendants' arms. It's so pathetic."

"I congratulate Barbara on her sensibility," said Simon dryly, "but it hardly gets us anywhere."

Challenged, Barbara flamed into self-assertion.

"All right then, let's get somewhere if that's what Simon wants. I'm going to suggest that we ought to begin by assuming that this poor boy *is* Hubert. He's your son, Mother, and Joanna's husband, and my brother, and that's a set of pretty good relationships to start with. In that case he ought to be in his proper place, his own home. We ought to send him down to Darchingham at once and arrange a suite of rooms for him, with trained nurses and a psychiatrist in attendance. There are thirty-six bedrooms at Darchingham, always kept in beautiful condition, and no big parties now. There's that little suite of four rooms in the west wing, quite separate. The children need never know that he's there. Why, an old uncle of Daddy's lived in it for years and we never even saw him. There's no knowing how Hubert could be improved if he were in his own home with the right care. It's the only possible thing we can do for him!"

There was a hush that could be felt. Then Isabel said, with a kind of dry amusement, "Well, I must say there's nothing like the rest of the family making free with Darchingham. The fact that I'm going to have a baby there in September probably doesn't mean a thing to anybody. I might be glad of the services of the psychiatrist myself by then; goodness knows, I'm going that way. Simon and I might even be willing to have the place turned into a nursing home in a good cause and if he were asked nicely; but I may as well tell you, Barbara, that when it comes to deciding who shall have the right to take up an abode at Darchingham, have no intention of *'assuming'* anything. Just to clear the

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ground, you'll please understand that there are going to be no assumptions in this business."

"I really, really don't know what I've said wrong," said Barbara, casting astonished looks at each person in the room.

The awkward silence was broken by Joanna, who remarked, "Surely, Barbara, you do realise what this affair of Hubert's identity is going to mean to Simon and Isabel?"

"Yes, yes, of course I do!" cried Barbara, who up to that moment had not even thought of it. "But I cannot believe that they don't want Hubert to be alive."

"Of course we want Hubert to be alive," said Simon with measured calm. "If Hubert is proved to be alive, Isabel and I will be the first to rejoice with the rest of the family. But the matter is extremely serious. I should be a most unworthy holder of the Lusca title if I did not place my duty towards it before any private consideration. In other words, I require to be convinced beyond all possibility of doubt that Hubert is alive before I step down in his favour."

"Nobody suggested you should step down in his favour," said Barbara warmly. "I never heard such a lot of fuss and exaggeration, just because I think the poor boy should go and make his home at Darchingham. I thought you wanted to save money."

"My dear Barbara, does it occur to you that with an unidentified stranger claiming to be Hubert, Earl of Lusca, living at Darchingham, my position there would be, to say the least, ambiguous? People would naturally assume that the family were really satisfied as to the man's identity and for reasons of their own wanted to keep it dark. The case when it comes to court in October would be prejudiced at the start. We have to avoid actions which would make the affair more complicated than it already is."

"In other words," said Isabel unruffled, "I am not going back to being Mrs. Simon Boldminer just because a total stranger happens to be wearing Hubert's wrist-watch."

"Oh," said Barbara. "I could scream. Why don't you stand up for me, Mother? You know I'm right. Isabel, I think you're vulgar."

"I still stand by Shornby Manor," said Lady Lusca in that quiet voice which always managed to dominate the situation. "To me the only vulgarity seems to lie in contemplating the lowering of one's standards to save one's purse. I never thought I should hear such a course advocated in *this* house."

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"What you mean by standards," said Isabel, "is not the same as what I mean by standards. I mean, keeping my end up and saving the places from going to rack and ruin and knowing just what's going out and what's coming in; you mean gold plate, and the footmen's livery, and a house in every county. This is 1946, not—oh Lord, we're at it again."

"Standards!" said Barbara. "How you can talk about standards——! You're so unfeeling. You're not even sorry for that poor boy."

"You've no right to say that," said Joanna, suddenly angry. "You've no right, Barbara. Do you expect us to keep on saying we're sorry for him? You can take that for granted."

"How you can come out with that so calmly, when he's probably your own husband——"

"I don't believe that he is my husband," said Joanna, in tones of such conviction that there followed a silence, only broken by the chiming of a clock on the mantelpiece.

Joanna looked at her mother-in-law sitting there, frozen, remote. What was going on behind that small indomitable face? This moment must have brought her to even sadder consciousness of the wreck of her world, to more bitter regret for what could never come again. It was impossible not to pity her, and yet how she would have scorned pity. It was as though this thing which had happened to her was the final indignity; the struggle which was going on now in her mind was the last struggle she would have to face. Poor old aristocrat; it was all over now. She was vanquished, subdued, effete, no longer a power even in her own family.

Simon's power was growing . . . and Isabel's. Barbara was just a voice, thin and negligible. Simon and Isabel were sweeping in on the tide, carrying everything, getting their way, insisting on the values of to-day. There lay the importance of this affair of Hubert; it had crystallised the family attitude and put everybody in their places, the old into the shadows, the new into the light of the future, the ghost into limbo. So it would be afterwards, ever afterwards, and she knew it—the old lady, the old flyer of standards. She knew she was finished, that she was beaten by something stronger than her own imperturbable dignity, and it was like the triumph of the machine over the delicate hand of the craftsman. Nothing would ever be the same again.

All this Joanna with new perception could read in the steely, unwavering eyes of the old woman with the velvet neckband and the diamond bow.

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"I don't believe he is my husband!" . . . Wasn't that the final assault? Wasn't that the crashing in of reality? She, Joanna, had spoken it, and the air was just ceasing to tingle.

Lady Lusca rose.

"It is time we were going. I suggest that we all consider this matter privately, seeing that public discussion leads us nowhere. I may add that I am not pleased. I am definitely not pleased. Your attitude mystifies me, Simon; Isabel's is—unfortunately—all too clear. Barbara talks like a child, and Joanna shows an indifference which shocks me."

"That won't do," said Simon bluntly. "There isn't time. We've got to make up our minds now; I told you that Salost and his crowd are going home the day after to-morrow."

"So am I," said Barbara. "I can't stay in London any longer, and I feel so worked up about the whole thing that I'd take poor Hubert back with me to Keckwith, if it wasn't for the children. Keckwith isn't the size of Darchingham, you know."

Lady Lusca had already reached the door, opened in answer to Simon's ring by the footman. She signed to Barbara and Joanna to precede her, and as they left the room she turned to Simon, and said with an air of final pronouncement, "You had better find a good private Home. Tell me, when you are ready to make the final arrangements."

XII

Simon came round to Henriques Place the following evening. He had the air of a man who is pleased with something he has achieved.

"Well," he said, "I've been to Conberry-Loder, you remember the Harley Street psychiatrist who saw the patient. He agrees that a good private Home is the best possible thing, and he knows the very one. A place in which he had an interest . . . where's the address? . . . Oh, here it is . . . Pinehurst. It's in Northamptonshire."

Lady Lusca lifted her eyebrows.

"Where is Northamptonshire?"

Simon explained.

"It isn't a great journey from London. He can go down by car. Actually it would have been a good thing if his own doctor could have travelled with him, but apart from Salost he hasn't got a doctor he can call his own. You couldn't ask Conberry-Loder, and old Eaton has gone back to Darchingham. It doesn't

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matter. We can arrange for a male nurse from the Registry to travel down."

"Ought I to go, do you think?"

Simon shook his head.

"You couldn't very well. I mean, it would be too trying for you to have to sit inside with the patient and the nurse, and you couldn't sit outside with the driver. I suggest that you wait until he is installed and then go down with Joanna to see that you approve of the place."

"You're sure it is a first class place?"

"Oh, a beautiful place. He showed me photographs. The house stands on a hill among the pine-woods overlooking open country. There are lawns, and a sun balcony to each bedroom. I insisted on the best suite. Sixteen guineas a week; that includes everything . . . food, nursing, attention by resident medical man. He can have his own servant there if he wants to. What's happened to Hubert's man? Possibly he wouldn't want to go there in any case."

"I'm afraid he wouldn't," said Lady Lusca. "He married and went away after he left Hubert. We could engage somebody else later."

"That would do. I haven't a doubt that this is an ideal place."

"He'll be quite private?"

"Oh yes. All the rooms in this place are private. There's only one snag——"

"One—what?"

"One unfortunate circumstance. They can't take him for a fortnight. The rooms he is to occupy are being re-decorated. He'll have to stay at the hotel, and I'll have to get a couple of nurses for him. It's awkward really, because they'll be strange to him—not that that can make much difference to him. But believe me, I'm more than tired with running round London telling my story. I shall be thankful when this is settled. Then we'll be able to get our strength up for the law suit."

"I hope you'll engage the very best nurses, Simon. Please don't quibble over fees."

He flushed a little.

"You needn't have said that. I should not think of employing any but the best. And it may occur to you that pretty well everything that has been paid so far has come out of my private purse. I haven't kept account of it either. I am not mercenary. Do you realise what it has cost me to keep this business out of the papers? That was on your account as much as on my own; in fact rather more on your account than mine, because in these

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days publicity really doesn't matter so much, while in your day it was the ultimate disgrace. Actually this very consideration has got me into Thruppwood's bad books, because he considers the affair were made public in the newspapers we might be able to reach further witnesses. For instance, if this fellow isn't Hubert, then he must have had a background. . . . But the court will bring all that up in October."

"A prospect I view with horror."

"So do I. I'll have to come to town and see it through. You'll be able to stay at Darchingham."

"But they'll want my evidence."

"We may be able to arrange something about that when the time comes. Where are the girls?"

"They've gone to see some friends of Barbara's. She's going home to-morrow."

"Are you intending to stay in London much longer?"

She hesitated.

"I shall wait until—Hubert—goes away; then I shall probably go down to that place and see he is comfortable. Then I might go to Scotland for a week or two, and take Joanna with me. What shall you do?"

"Pretty much the same. Take Isabel to Darchingham, and then go north for a bit of shooting. I need a holiday after all this, heaven knows; so do you." There was a moment's awkward silence, and he added, looking at her out of the corner of his eyes, "I hope you are satisfied that I have done my best. It isn't easy, being the only man in the family. Thruppwood could be more helpful, without straining himself. But if you're satisfied——"

The look on her face seemed to imply assent, but she gave a slight shudder. He thought, She's thinking of Hubert, I'll be bound . . . as she saw him last, bounding down the stairs, cap and gloves in hand, to say good-bye . . . his wife hanging on his arm . . . Graystead carrying his blue kitbag out to the car . . . Hubert, with that clear, fair look of his; that young gay arrogance. And now it's either the mouldering earth of a Belgian forest ride, or the clean, expensive tomb of a secluded English nursing home where we can push him away from our view and try to forget. First she wanted him . . . and then she claimed him . . . and now all she asks is that he shall be discreetly buried again. She doesn't like ghosts; none of us do.

Lady Lusca sighed, and said, "I think you have done the best thing, Simon."

"Thank you."

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She rose, and pressed the bell which hung from a purple cord beside the fireplace.

"You'll have a glass of wine before you go?"

He would have preferred to leave, but didn't want to appear ungracious.

Esther made one of her silent, affable appearances.

"Oh Esther, Mr. Simon will take a glass of that very nice Madeira."

He noted the "Mr. Simon".

When Esther returned with the small salver and one Venetian crystal glass of wine flanked by a delicate biscuit, he asked, "My dear Constance, aren't you going to drink too?"

"No, thank you. I haven't felt like either food or drink since—this—happened."

"Oh come. You mustn't take it like that."

She smiled faintly; and draining his glass rather more quickly than did honour to the wine, he took his leave. Luck, however, was dead against him, for while he was on the stairs the front door opened and the two young women entered whom he had hoped to avoid.

"It's Simon," said Barbara. "Has anything happened?"

He joined them in the hall.

"I came to tell your mother that I have made all arrangements for the patient to enter a private Home in the country. Everything is satisfactory, and she approved. I didn't know you would be out, Joanna. She'll tell you all about it."

"When? . . . I mean, when is he going away?"

"Unfortunately they can't make room for him for another fortnight. We'll just have to continue the present arrangement."

"Oh, it's dreadful!" cried Barbara. "Dreadful! Pushing him away, out of sight, out of mind."

Simon gave her a contemptuous look, and taking his hat from the small boy who was training as a footman, said a brief good-bye in Joanna's direction.

"Don't *you* think so?" said Barbara accusingly, following her sister-in-law upstairs. "Can't any of you treat him like a human being? Do you think he has no feeling?"

"Oh for God's sake, be quiet!" gasped Joanna, thrusting open the door of her own room and flinging her handbag upon the bed. She felt suddenly as though the house would suffocate her. She hurried downstairs again, out of the door, into the square. The car was gone, she began to walk hastily without noticing where she was going.

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Breathless at last, she seemed better able to think. She turned into a small garden where a ring of benches surrounded a tarnished bronze fountain, and sat down. It was peaceful and warm, and the air was heavy with amber evening light. There was a chatter of bird song; the undertones of traffic noises seemed far away.

She felt weak now; her eyes were hot and dry, her hands restless.

There was a picture she had seen once in a Paris gallery; an English picture, called "Come not, you dead, to the warm sun" . . . never quite forgotten, now it haunted her. Her heart sank in hopeless pain for the cruelty in the world. She was sick with despair, hating the warm yellow light, the birds, the leaping fountain.

A child, pawing his way along the bench, suddenly fell over her feet; he recovered himself and stood staring at her, a square, rosy, not unattractive boy of about five. The mother, rather young and apologetic, followed him.

"Eddy, stop staring at the lady."

She sat on the bench, and watching the child anxiously, called again, "Eddy, come away from the water . . . don't you touch the pigeons, Eddy . . . if you tumble, Eddy, I'll . . ."

Joanna bit her lips, her cheeks tightening. The young mother, mistaking the signs, said, "He's a nuisance, I'm sure. I'm too nervous with him, that's a fact. There's only him and me, you see. His Dad's been missing since 1943. Headstrong too . . . it's getting me down."

Joanna made herself say, "He's a nice little boy. I'm sorry about his father. Is there no hope?"

"Well . . . would there be!"

"There are worse things than being missing."

The young woman looked surprised.

"You mean—dead?"

"I meant—alive."

The young woman gave her a bright, questioning look. Obviously she was queer in the head, this girl in the elegant black frock with the gleam of a platinum wedding ring showing through her black net glove.

She asked, "Have you lost *your* husband, perhaps?"

"I—don't know."

And rising, she walked away from the puzzled stare which followed her out of sight.

She walked until the burning of her feet in their thin, high-heeled shoes penetrated her consciousness and she realised that she was far from home. Home! What was home? She felt

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there was not one place to which she belonged, to which she might now turn as a worn-out traveller turns for refreshment. Utterly and eternally lonely and lost was she, carrying with her, as well as remorse, a burden of hopeless pity for that other living ghost.

"Forgive me, Hubert," she cried in her heart. "Forgive me, wherever you are. . . ."

She hailed a taxi at last, and leaning back in it with closed eyes was carried to Henriques Place. Esther met her with a bleak look.

"Oh, there you are. And dinner's nearly over. I can't think——"

"Please apologise for me. You can send a cup of coffee to my room; I don't want dinner."

Barbara herself brought the coffee.

"Where *have* you been? I mean . . . disappearing. . . ."

Joanna, who was sitting on the edge of the bed nursing one aching foot, her kicked off shoes on the rug before her, said, "I'm sorry. I wanted some air."

"You've not been tearing about all over London?"

"If you can call it tearing."

A kind of light dawned over Barbara's face.

"Oh . . . then you do care more . . . than you show?"

"I'd be awfully obliged," said Joanna, "if you'd leave me alone. Please, Barbara."

"I'm terribly sorry, Jon. Don't hate me, will you?"

"Of course not."

"Perhaps you'll come to Keckwith soon, and stay. We had such grand times. The children haven't forgotten."

Joanna smiled faintly.

"Neither have I. That awful horse. . . ."

"Oh, but you were marvellous. And it'll all come back to you when you're in the saddle again."

"Thanks, Barbara . . . you can put the coffee down."

After Barbara had gone, even the hurt look on the face of one so ingenuously kind and well-meaning was another stabbing regret.

During the fortnight which followed, carefully avoiding the Baker Street studio, she found herself most at ease, strangely enough, in the rather astringent company of Isabel.

"How you stand that Henriques Place atmosphere I don't know," Isabel would say. "Like a perpetual funeral."

"In a way, it is a funeral."

"You mean, that sense of a ghost in the room, while he's still in London. Yes, this fortnight's delay is a trial. I've never known Simon so irascible; he gets on my nerves and I get on his."

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Mind you, I've got a lot of sympathy with poor old Constance. Her stoic Edwardian gallantry is being put to a real 1946 test. There I go—dates again. How she hates it . . . and I'm an absolute psychological case, every time I see her I can feel that sentence kicking at my mouth to jump out. Does she still go to the hotel to see him?"

"Most days."

"Most days! And you?"

"I go with her."

"Then you deserve a crown. I call that noble but unnecessary."

"It's the least we can do."

"What good does it do? He can't care."

"You don't know that."

"Look here! You don't really think he's Hubert, do you?"

"I don't; she does."

Isabel shrugged her shoulders.

"Whatever she thinks, she'll be glad when he's safely popped away. And doing a little armchair detective work, I guess that deep down in the bottom of her heart she's hugging that blessed doubt, because she'd very much rather have things as they are, him in a Home and Simon and me at Darchingham, than him at Darchingham and the devil of a story in the newspapers. I'm nothing if not a realist, and I know you are, too."

"I'm not sentimental," said Joanna, "but I'm not hard-boiled either. At first I wondered if we were actually guilty of trying to push that poor man out of sight, to save ourselves from something unpleasant. But in any case he can't be out of sight for long. When the case comes on——"

"It'll be grim," said Isabel. "But I won't be there. *You'll* be in the witness-box. Well, I'm sorry for you, Jon, and I think you've come well out of this. So does Simon. . . . Just another week to go, and even then I don't think I'll ever pass that hotel without a shudder."

Joanna was driven home in Isabel's Rolls, feeling rather appalled by Isabel's realism. Another feeling resolved itself into resentment at Isabel's assumption that they spoke the same language. Why this change of front? She had always thought she liked Isabel, and now she wasn't so sure. As usual, she blamed herself for this indecision.

At home, she was met at the top of the stairs by Esther.

"Oh, there you are, Joanna." Always punctiliously correct in public, when they were alone Esther called the family by Christian names as a concession to her relationship.

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"If you'd told me you were going out," she added, "I could have gone with you. It is confusing to keep ordering and re-ordering the car."

"I've only been to Isabel's," said Joanna.

"Oh! How is dear Isabel?"

"If I told you she was in a decline you wouldn't believe me."

Esther gave her a cold look.

"Lady Luscaj has gone out, to You Know Where. Such devotion."

Joanna escaped from her, and went on to her room, where Proudfoot sat darning stockings beside the portable wireless.

(Isn't there anywhere, thought Joanna, where I can be alone?)

That evening for the first time in their life together Lady Luscaj talked to her daughter-in-law about Hubert's boyhood. Joanna, no longer impatient as a few months ago she would have been, felt the pathos of it, not on her own behalf but for this ageing woman whose happiness was all in the past.

"He was such a considerate boy, Joanna. That's unusual in boys, consideration for their elders. When I think of my friends and their sons. . . . But Hubert—I remember once when he was twelve he insisted upon leaving a gymkhana early and wouldn't tell us why, though it meant sacrificing the chance of riding in the last event. We found out afterwards that, before he knew it was the day of the gymkhana, he had promised old Nanny to attend a birthday party at her cottage. Any other boy would have forgotten a promise that turned out so inconveniently for himself, but Hubert would never disappoint anybody. That was typical of him. You must have found it so."

"I suppose there never was an occasion. . . . It's only now that I realise I didn't know him very well."

"It was always the same. He would never make a plan without first finding out how it would affect other people. What a great successor he would have made to his father! But it doesn't do to think of such things. It was never to be."

Joanna was silent.

"When I saw him this afternoon . . . he was too unwell to get up to-day. I sat beside his bed, and thought of the times I had sat beside his bed at home at Darchingham, watching him asleep, thinking of the man he was going to be. It isn't good to make a future for your child and demand it. One thing gave me comfort. I found that I could look at that poor wreck to-day without pain or horror. In spirit I was at Darchingham, and there was peace, and the feeling that Hubert was not lost to me."

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(Joanna thought, "When he goes away will she be sorry or glad?")

"You make me feel inadequate," she said.

"But, my dear, I understand. How could you have really known Hubert?"

(She would have loved me if I had recognised him, thought Joanna. Should I have acted it? But I couldn't—I couldn't!)

"Please tell me when you want me to go with you again," she said.

"There won't be many more times. We shall be back in London by autumn."

(They were both thinking, "And then it will all begin again.")

"I never talked to you about Hubert before—about the things I remember so long ago. You must forgive me. Except by me, it is all so much better forgotten."

Joanna felt the sting of the implication, that she had not now—nor ever had had—any part in those memories.

"Where have you been to-day?" the old lady asked.

"I had tea with Isabel."

"Perhaps you find it easy to understand Isabel."

Joanna felt the heat rise in her cheeks.

"I never have said I was a realist."

"Is that what Isabel said? . . . A harsh-sounding modern word. Ah well, at least we have all defined ourselves."

(Have I ever defined myself? thought Joanna with a sense of shock.)

"Did you see Simon?" asked Lady Lusca, rising with sudden nervous activity.

"No."

"Please tell Esther to get him on the telephone. I want to speak to him. There are only two days left before—— He must tell me what arrangements he is making. He mustn't leave me unprepared. . . ."

It was finally arranged that the journey to Northamptonshire should take place two nights later; the patient and nurse would then be able to leave the hotel and travel unnoticed, under the veil of the brief summer darkness.

All day the family had felt the tension. Joanna sat in her own room trying to read and sew; Lady Lusca in hers, motionless, her cheek resting on her hand.

At half-past ten the telephone rang. Esther went over in her silent tiptoe way and answered it.

"It's Mr. Simon. He says he's just going over to the hotel. He'll ring again later."

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Simon rang again at a little after eleven.

"I'll speak to him myself," said Lady Lusca.

"They've started," said Simon.

"Was everything quite all right?"

"Quite. Absolutely."

"Was he—comfortable?"

"Oh yes. Conberry-Loder saw him in the morning and pronounced him fit for the journey. There were two drivers and the nurse, so they should get there without delay or mishap."

"Did he——" She took a breath. "Did he seem to—mind?"

"My dear Constance!"

"Thank you for all you've done, Simon. When will you know that they've arrived safely?"

"The car will be back to-morrow afternoon, but they may give me a ring before that. I'll come round and see you when I know. Now it's all over, so go to bed and get some rest. Good night."

"Good night."

She put down the receiver and sighed deeply. Then she said, "Go to bed, Esther; it's very late. I'll tell Joanna myself. There's nothing more we can do."

She tapped at the door of her daughter-in-law's room and entered.

"Not in bed!"

"No. . . ."

"Simon has just telephoned."

"I heard the ring."

"They've left London safely. He was quite comfortable."

"Thank you for telling me."

"Good night, my dear. Try to rest. And let us both pray to-night for Hubert."

At half-past nine next morning the shrilling of the bell brought Graystead to the front door. Simon strode in, passed his hat, and went straight upstairs. Encountering Esther, he asked, "Is Lady Lusca up?"

"Well, no, Mr. Simon. She's still in her room."

"Say that I wish to see her. I'll wait if she prefers to dress."

A moment later he was ushered in.

"This is a very early call, Simon?"

Lady Lusca in a quilted dressing-gown was seated before a table that bore her breakfast tray. Sunlight poured in through the east window.

"Will you have coffee, or tea? Shall Esther bring you a cup?"

"No. No, thank you."

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She saw then that he looked at her queerly. She knew that something was amiss.

"Tell me," she said. "Tell me at once."

He looked away from her, round the room; at the breakfast tray, the canopied bed, Esther hovering expectantly.

"The journey . . ." he said, "it was too much for him. He collapsed and died a few minutes after they arrived."

XIII

No man can have reached the age of forty without experiences that are startling, disconcerting, sometimes bitter, always memorable. To Simon, walking home across the park—for he had sent the car on ahead—it seemed that he would never forget this walk. It was like walking out of fog into sunshine, out of the fog of apprehension and worry into a sunshine that means all's right with the world.

He walked across the park under a cornflower-blue sky, beside the sparkling lake, under summer-scented trees. All this bright day he owned, and a future, too; all that other poor fellow owned was a slab in a mortuary. A realist and not given to thinking, now he could not quite escape from his thoughts. A superficial delight in what looked like the direct intervention of providence was slightly offset by the pricking of an idea that it wasn't so much what you did as what you felt that made up the sum of the world's happiness or misery.

How had they felt towards that poor fellow, who might have been Hubert? Better not probe into that. Take him away; shut him out of sight; let us forget if we can. But could one forget? No, not for many a long day. That awful lingering feeling of unfairness, a lack of pity, of indifference that would not stoop, of cruelty that could not rise . . . they left their traces on the memory.

Children raced about the park, nearly overturning him with their scooters, their roller skates; up and down the narrow paths that ran like lines on a map, like livid cicatrices on a disfigured face. There it went again! Chilling, clouding the day.

I'm a fool, said Simon. What's done is done. We're living, aren't we? He was unlucky, poor devil, and nobody can say that he isn't better off dead. Why, everybody's better off! The old lady who was worried to death about him, and his wife who might have had to spend the rest of her life with him. Isabel and I and our children . . . all better off.

And now, thought Simon, we can begin to live. In September,

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please God, I shall have an heir at last. It's time the old lady retired to a quieter life; we'll see less of her in London in future. That girl, Joanna? Oh, let her settle down at the Dower House, too . . . tea parties, gardening, village affairs, all the things that women love. She's a widow, anyway; she's had her day.

I'm not callous, thought Simon, remembering that hurried journey through the night after the perfunctory examination by a doctor who cared as little as anybody else . . . I'm not callous. Poor devil . . . poor devil. But he was better dead, not a doubt of it.

He reached the house.

"Her ladyship is in the study, my lord, and wants to see you when you come in."

Isabel was anxious to know how they had taken the news. . . .

"It's all right," he reassured her. "They couldn't help realising how much better it was that way."

"What did they say?"

"Oh, Constance was very reasonable. Actually it was a damn great relief to the old girl. Joanna looked a bit stunned, but she took it all right. Now they're going to get out of London at once, and I intend we shall do the same. Can we leave to-morrow? The next day?"

"I'll have to see what engagements I have."

"Cancel everything. The season's finished anyway."

She gave a great sigh.

"Oh, it's been awful. When I think what might have happened!"

"Don't *you* get neurotic. It's just London—too hot. You're over-tired."

"Will Constance expect me to go and see her? I don't feel like it."

"I shouldn't bother about that. In any case it's for her to come to you. You're the head of the family on the female side."

"I still find myself deferring."

"Well, don't do it, Isabel! She's reigned a great deal too long in any case."

"Everything will be different after this. . . . I think I'd better ring up and ask her to tea. Then it won't look as if——"

"Darling," said Simon, "you ought to be in diplomacy."

"She probably won't spend much more time in London."

"That's what I'm hoping."

A worried look stole across Isabel's face.

"It's a queer idea for me to have," she said, "but I was suddenly thinking of that poor fellow, the one who wasn't Hubert. He must have belonged to somebody. What a good thing they didn't know."

V

I

THE taxi-driver carried her two suit-cases into the narrow hall-way, and looked round with a sniff.

"Is this it, miss?"

"Yes—thank you. You can put them down there. How much?"

"Two a' nine."

She gave him a half-crown and a shilling, and he made off rapidly, with that curt dispatch peculiar to disappearing taxi-drivers.

She pushed her black handbag more firmly under her arm and began to climb the steep flights of stairs with their worn lino-covered treads and rather grimy banisters.

At the door on the second landing she paused, and knocked. It was a nervous knock, and resulted in a small and not sufficiently obtrusive sound.

For the first time that day a rush of apprehension assailed her. Having come to the end of a train of conscious actions, she felt as though she were left dangling at the end of a string in mid-air. It wasn't so much a question of whether the string would hold, as of whether Fate would suddenly cut it and let her drop.

She had always been a great one for packing up and running out, had Jon. Now she was running out again, for the last time, and all the *élan* which had usually attended the operation was missing. There was an ache in her shoulders, a cold weight just above her waist, an awful alone-ness in a heart which had ever been self-contained.

She stood before a shut door, and it seemed to her only too dismally symbolic.

That taxi had been a bridge between the old sheltered order and the new wild speculation of life. The taxi gone, the bridge was gone. There would be no going back; that way of life was vanished for ever. It was like going out of a world, a universe, and dropping through space; one could never climb back.

Strangely enough—surprisingly—it had been Esther, always most reluctant to accept her, who had made that absurd, conventional remark in the hall, while Graystead had directed the

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carrying out of her suit-cases . . . "You must send us a line when you're settled."

A "line" . . . the thought of it brought a twisted smile to her bitten lip. No, it had been too final for "lines."

A graceful inclination of a stately head . . . no kiss . . . just the light brush of finger-tips against her hand. . . . "Good-bye, Joanna; there isn't anything else for us to say, is there?"

No . . . there wasn't anything else to say; it had all been said. It had all been said, and now after silence came a closed door and a knock unanswered.

She thought, "If he isn't here I shall die."

And as though he had subconsciously become aware that somebody was standing outside his closed door, he laid down his work and went to see.

He opened the door, and saw her standing there, hatless and unusually pale, in a plain dark coat, with an envelope-shaped bag under her arm.

"Jon! Why didn't you knock?"

"I did knock. I thought you weren't in. Didn't you hear me?"

"No . . . I had a feeling that someone was there. Come in."

She followed him into the studio and stood against the littered table.

"I've come to say good-bye, Bagpipes."

"Oh!" He was taken by surprise and looked at her in wordless astonishment.

"Sit down, Jon. You're not leaving at once?"

"I won't stay long. You're busy."

"It can wait. Of course it can."

There was a certain constraint; they both felt it.

He said, "I got your letter about that poor fellow's death. Of course it was the best thing that could happen . . . who could doubt it?"

She looked down at the table.

"It left a shocking sense of guilt, nevertheless."

"Why?"

"He was so—unwanted."

"You mustn't be sentimental about it; he was past understanding in any case."

She looked up with a rueful smile.

"You accusing me of sentimentality! And it's so easy to say he was past understanding; that's what we've all said, all along. Like saying that fish can't feel because they're cold-

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blooded. All right . . . when I've *been* a fish I'll tell you whether that's true."

"Now you're going to torment yourself for the rest of your life about that."

"Oh no, I'm not. It's all over so far as I'm concerned. I've left all that behind . . . all of it . . . for ever."

She sat down on a wooden chair beside his work table, and he pulled out for himself the tall stool which he found most practicable for draughtsmanship.

"Was it after you got the news about his death that you made this decision?"

"Yes. I knew then that I couldn't go on any longer. It was time for a break. Don't look so surprised! You knew I was going to do it."

"Yes, but——"

"Did you think I wouldn't have the nerve when it came to the point? Or that I didn't really mean to leave at all?"

He shook his head.

"I never doubted that you'd carry through anything you promised to do."

"And talking of promises," she said, "I want you to know that I did keep mine to you—you know, when you asked me not to leave until Lady Lusca was ready to go away from London. She is going . . . it's all arranged for Friday. She and Esther are leaving for Darchingham, and then going on to Scotland. That decided me . . . but you'll never guess how difficult it was to screw up my courage. I must be weakening—slipping, or something. I woke up at three o'clock in the morning and went quite cold with fright. I couldn't sleep any more. You know how you *plan* an interview . . . making up all the dialogue . . . 'I say' and then 'she says.' It never works out like that."

"What happened then, when you finally told her?"

"Not very much happened. I think that actually, at the bottom of her heart, she was relieved at the prospect of being rid of me. You see, I'd never belonged. I'd never got their attitude of mind . . . though I'd tried . . . I hadn't really wanted to. Of course her mind flew, like an arrow from the bow, to the idea of scandal. It was the bogey of her generation, 'of course. Was I going to make a scandal . . . to get myself in the news? I think for a moment she had visions of my starting a registry or a flower shop or going on the stage, trading on the name. When she heard that I intended to drop the name, finally and completely, she drew a breath of relief and the whole situation eased up. . . ."

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She checked herself abruptly and her eyes took on a distant look. (. . . "To leave us? You intend to *leave* us! But you can't do that?"

"Please listen to me, Lady Lusca. You realise that only the slightest thread has held us together. I tried to stay because I felt that it was my duty to stay. Now I have a different idea of my duty; I can't stay any longer."

The old lady, with superb dignity, sank back into the chair from which she had half risen.

"May I know what you do mean, Joanna! You are very difficult to understand."

"I'm sorry. What I mean is that the time has come for me to make a life of my own."

"A separate establishment? People will think that you and I cannot agree."

"No, oh no." She smiled a little in spite of the nervous tension which kept her solemn. "I want you to renounce all obligation towards me, because I am going to make my own life again. I'm going to earn my own living."

Registry! Flower shop! Stage! . . .)

She relaxed.

"She couldn't understand my giving up the name, Bagpipes; she simply couldn't comprehend any state of mind in which a woman fortunate enough to be elevated to the rank of a Lusca could contemplate giving all that up. I could have explained to her, but I didn't. I couldn't go into all that with somebody who wasn't sympathetic; so I let her think me mad enough—or vulgar enough—not to appreciate what I was throwing away. When she heard that I was going to work at Harbridge—I don't think she'd ever heard of Harbridge, so it seemed to her encouragingly remote—under the name of Jon Lewalter she seemed to draw breath again; but she made it plain that if once I broke away it must be for ever. No future claims or connections. I told her she could trust me for that. Then she said an awfully decent thing . . . she said, 'I have faith in you, Joanna.' The first time she ever said a thing like that to me; I loved her for it. I do admire her terribly, Bagpipes; I'd almost like—some day—to see her again; but, of course, that won't ever be. I've jumped off the edge of her world into—"

"What were you going to say?" he asked.

"Into a much lower but more comfortable one, I suppose."

"Into mine?"

Her eyes looked suddenly tender.

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"That's sweet of you. I see what it means . . . we can be friends now without a barrier between us."

He stubbed out his cigarette fiercely.

"*Now*? . . . I thought you came to say good-bye?"

She looked more guarded.

"Harbridge isn't a thousand miles away. If you aren't going to write to me I shan't have anything to hang on to."

"I'm a bad letter writer, Jon. I'm afraid you'll feel cheated."

She got up and began to walk round the studio.

"Oh, you've finished Merle Tellar's picture?"

"It's almost ready to go home. It's pretty bad."

She looked at him critically.

"You're depressed about your work nowadays, aren't you?"

"I'll never be a portrait painter, if that's what you mean."

"I think this is beautiful. Her husband will, too."

"It's magazine-cover painting. I'm going to stick to that in future. More honest."

"Oh dear . . . when you're in that mood it's no use talking to you."

He said rather abruptly, "What are your plans to-day?"

"I'm going to Harbridge, of course."

"Are they expecting you? Have you arranged anything?"

"I've booked a room at the Station Hotel. To-morrow I shall go to the laboratory. I haven't written; I thought I'd rather go in person. I want them to know I'm sincere; a letter might be misleading."

"Sincere! I see you intend to under-rate yourself."

"Thank you, my dear," she said with friendly mockery. "We've travelled a long way together, haven't we?"

She spoke lightly, but he waited and then replied quite gravely, "Yes . . . yes, we have."

She replaced the green linen curtain which protected the canvas and walked over to the window, thinking of all the times she had stood there looking out over the roofs, or down into the streaming traffic of the street; thinking of all the sparring and all the confidences they had exchanged in the studio; thinking how this place had come to mean to her a dear refuge and how in future she must learn to do without it, learn to live in a world where there were only strangers.

("But have you said anything to Isabel about this?—to Barbara?"

"No, Lady Lusca, I've come to you first of all."

"How am I going to tell them? What will Isabel *think*?"

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It seemed to be a comment on changing family relationships that the old lady should to-day be considering what Isabel would think. Isabel, now firmly at the top of the family column, would be too busy arranging everybody else at the bottom to do much thinking. Could it be possible that she might say, "What? Joanna gone? Well, that's one less of the old lot, thank goodness!"

A smile suddenly broke all over her face as she almost heard Isabel saying those very words. She turned round from the window, and saw her friend irritably scoring the table with a pen-knife.

"Bagpipes, from this minute let's cast gloom aside. I can't go on feeling low for ever. Say something bracing! Where's that devastating frankness of yours?"

He suddenly pushed a pile of odds and ends away from him; a portfolio fell upon the floor with a smack.

"How are you going to look after yourself? How much money have you got?"

"Oh, I must tell you about that."

She stood with her back to the curtain of stiff purple silk which draped the model's throne.

"I told you that I was going to give up Hubert's income. Lady Lusca did think it another point in my favour. I wouldn't take anything that came from the estate. I made it clear that it was to be to the family as though I had never existed. Family jewellery too; I left it behind me. But she told me that there was something to which I had a right; under Hubert's will I was entitled to the money in his bank deposit. About two thousand pounds. That was actually mine. I couldn't see any reason for refusing that. Hubert intended it for me . . . do you agree?"

"Yes, of course. That's yours, Jon. I'm relieved that you have something behind you."

"It means that I can supplement a small wage at the laboratory. Two thousand pounds is a lot of money; I'll make it last. Actually it makes me feel secure and opulent, so don't waste any pity on me."

He nodded, relief showing in his eyes.

"What time is your train to Harbridge?"

"Five-forty."

"But it's only a little past twelve. What are you going to do?"

"First take my luggage to Euston and deposit it. I've only got two suit-cases with me; the rest I have left to be sent on. Then I want to come back into town to do some shopping. I haven't any dresses suitable for a working woman; I must buy two plain ones and some white overalls. I can pay for them and have them sent to Harbridge when I get an address."

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"Will you meet me for lunch, at about two? I have some jobs to do first."

She thought for a moment, and said, "No, I don't think I can time myself. I'd better be free."

"Well, you're free now," he said, "goodness knows."

She looked up sharply.

"Bagpipes, you said that quite bitterly. Of course I'm free. In fact I have the strangest feeling of not belonging anywhere . . . like being disembodied. I suppose I'll get over it."

He said, more gently, "Don't let yourself think about what's happened . . . don't drag it round with you. You're too close to it, you can't see it in proportion. Try and feel that you're going—quite free—to a kind of adventure. That gay curiosity of yours, you need it now. Find it again, Jon, and let it carry you. You'll soon have something to hold on to."

There was a silence.

At last she said, "You've been heavenly to me. I knew you'd be like that. It's good-bye now. Will you come and see me at Harbridge?"

"Yes I will. I'll come up for a week-end before long. It won't be the same here when you're gone."

She smiled.

"I've been very good at keeping you from your work."

She held out her hand.

"Good-bye, my dear, and thank you for everything."

"Good-bye, Jon . . . bless you."

With clasped hands they drew a little closer. He bent his head and rather awkwardly kissed her cheek. He got the impression that there were tears in her eyes.

"Shall I come down and get you a taxi?"

"No, please don't. I'll easily pick one up. Please!"

"All right."

Suddenly she was gone, and he heard her footsteps growing fainter and farther away down the stairs. Then he shut the door.

II

She was gone, and the room was quiet. He was sitting in the same position, before the same piece of work which her arrival had interrupted, and suddenly he found himself almost wondering whether she had really been there at all. Could he have dreamed it?—that she came to tell him of this abrupt change in her life,

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to say good-bye. No, it was true—it was!—for he could still see her there, standing against the stiff purple draping; her voice was still in the air.

Difficult to believe, nevertheless . . . that Jon had broken with her background, had appeared for a few moments in a meeting that was almost formal compared with the spontaneity of their old, stolen encounters, and now was gone. That was the word which stood out, square and hard. Gone. To-night she would be gone from London; she would not come here again. She was gone with the summer . . . strange, disquieting influence . . . a three months' episode. Now it was quiet; he had quiet, and time to work—all the time in the world.

He tilted a drawing-board, staring at it and yet missing that keen appreciation which was the prelude to sure and steady work. That sudden distaste for work which every creative artist knows came upon him . . . the spirit was lacking . . . he could not. This state of mind surprised him, for it was a rare mood. He was not over-temperamental, and when he found it impossible to do creative work he was always able to turn to a routine job.

Now he could feel her everywhere; her grace, her perfume, that emanation of personality which is present like a fragrance and as elusive. He could see her by the model's throne; by the window; on the divan; near the door; leaning over the table with fingers outstretched to pick up that sketch she had liked . . . here it was. The loch and its grey-green ripples tipped with light; the island in the loch and the silver birches that marched to the water's edge; the rose feathers of dawn in a silver sky.

To be there! To be there, his heart suddenly cried. It is mine, he said, though I may never see it. It is mine and its secret heart is mine. It is mine, and she has given it back to me. The loch . . . and the island in the loch . . . and the house on the loch. She has given me my eternal answer; she had drowned my bitterness in those sweet waters that lap the shore of my own land. Here is my lasting content. . . .

He worried a little that he could do no work, for this meant a day lost. There were sketches promised for Friday, and he had never yet been late with a contract.

He drew towards him the drawing-board with its blank pinned sheet, and seizing a red crayon made a rapid unsatisfactory sketch of the face which was everywhere in the studio. The lines, the features were near enough, but the look was wrong. Moody, unlightened. He had never seen her look like that . . . it was

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not Jon. He had always said she would make a bad subject, for her expression changed every moment.

He could hear her voice now, gay, husky . . . "What would the family want with a portrait of me? To hang it in the great hall at Darchingham labelled, 'The One Who Never Got Here'?" Oh, Jon, Jon! . . .

This was no use; he would go out and get lunch. He felt irritated and frustrated, for he had planned a particularly busy morning.

Out in the street, he felt a sudden distaste for the crowded noisy café where he usually ate; there would be men who knew him, he would have to talk. He would go—yes, he would go home,

This was so contrary to his usual custom that Mrs. Harris, who was enjoying a leisurely gossip with the baker through the area railings, nearly—as she said afterwards—fainted away at the sight of him. Illness? . . . Bad news? . . .

"I thought I'd come home for lunch," he said, apologetically.

"Well!" said Mrs. Harris, and added, "There isn't much."

"I don't want much."

"I'll send Moya up to lay your table. She's just come in from school."

But it was the dark and flashing-eyed Olga who arrived—Olga who had a habit of wiping the mustard pot with the corner of her frock.

"Where's Moya?" he said.

"Downstairs."

"I thought—I mean, I haven't seen her lately."

"She doesn't want to see you any more."

He was astounded.

"She thinks you don't like her," said Olga. "She wrote you a piece of poetry ages ago, and you said you'd paint a picture of her; and now you've forgotten, or else you don't want to any more."

"So that's it!"

He felt sudden remorse. It was a shabby thing to disappoint a child. All these weeks he hadn't even thought of Moya. The time had flown for him, but for a child time is quite different. . . .

"Tell her I'm sorry," he said. "Tell her to come. I want her to come."

"I'll see. Your lunch is ready; it's only cold."

Some time after he had finished eating there came a tiny tap at the door. He called, "Come in!" but no one came. He realised that the child's pride was at stake; he must go to her

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now. He opened the door, and there she stood on the mat with a little tray of coffee in her hand.

"Moya! Come in, my dear."

"Not if you don't want me to."

He took her rather grubby schoolgirl's hand.

"I've been so busy—terribly busy. Forgive me."

It was an adult appeal; it flattered her. She smiled.

"You *had* forgotten me, hadn't you, Mr. Bane?"

He gave her a bright sidelong glance.

"Don't you start those feminine tricks! I won't stand it from you. Pour out that coffee, and get a cup for yourself."

She flashed about the room, happy and radiant.

"Moya, I *will* paint you."

She stood perfectly still with the delightful shock, and he thought, If I could put that promise of beauty on paper, that maltreated loveliness of hers, that gorgeous neglected hair, that translucent tide-marked skin, I'd be a Murillo, no less.

"I'm not a very good painter," he said. "It would take a great painter to do you justice."

"Never mind," she said kindly. "I expect you'll do your best."

"And you're not a very good poet, are you?"

She smiled secretly.

"I've stopped all that."

"Oh no!"

"Oh yes. Our English mistress says it is a very common thing to write poetry at my age. I don't want to do a very common thing."

"You disappoint me."

"When are you going to start to paint me?"

"I'll begin on Saturday. You shall sit there by the window."

"And I'll wear—"

(Murillo rags, he thought! But she won't.)

"I have a white dress that's rather beautiful. Pre-war. It was Olga's once."

"Really white?" he asked cautiously.

"Not very white now. *You* know . . ."

(I'm painting this picture to please her, he thought, not myself.)

"Wear the white," he said. "It's your picture."

"May I tell everybody at school?"

"I don't see why not."

"I shall gain face."

"Then tell. Tell, O Daughter of Heaven."

She burst out laughing.

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"I wish you came home to lunch every day."

He was soothed and contented by her pleasure, but when she had gone back to school an awful restlessness descended upon him. He couldn't bear to be indoors, and yet he didn't want to go out. He walked the room, flung himself into a chair, could not concentrate on reading. Tingling with nerves, he limped to the window and stood looking down at the street and trying not to shout out or smash something. It was only two o'clock. He couldn't work. The wasted day was full now of screaming reproachful voices. Escape! Escape!

He went out, to walk the streets, to buy an unwanted paper, to drop in for a few moments at a gallery and stare resentfully and unseeing at an exhibition of modern sculpture.

The hot, dusty, tarnished streets of London at the end of July held him in their trap. Heat. No air. Hot smells of petrol and basement dinners and blistered paint. Throngs on the pavements forced him into the gutter. Walk, walk, walk, until the aching of his feet brought him to a standstill. He wiped his brow with the back of his hand, and suddenly thought how grimy and dispirited he must look, rushing aimlessly through the streets on a hot, heavy, sunless afternoon. Killing time, when he ought to be treasuring it.

He went into a restaurant cloakroom to restore himself to order, but shook his head grimly at the reflection in the mirror. Grey of face, heavy-eyed, drooping of shoulder, drab and almost shabby of clothing. Nearly everybody you met in these days had that same beaten look, that disappointed, what's-the-use-of-it look.

He tried to think of the silver loch, to conjure up again the spiritual glow, but perhaps the dingy tea-room of a Kensington High Street restaurant was not the place. He would go back to the studio, to that cool peace . . . and yet, peace wasn't exactly what he wanted. He didn't know what to do with it when he got it.

He sat for half an hour over a cup of indifferent tea, slapped down before him by a hair-patting waitress who was about as interested in her job as he was in his.

Life had gone sour on him, that was it. How awful. Other days like this one were too horrible to contemplate. He had never felt like it before. Was it the onset of middle-age, or the death of the spirit, or the sudden withdrawal of inspiration?

Abandoned! A wave of deep despair swept over him, and retreated. He came to his senses, paid the bill, and went out into the street feeling chilly in spite of the heat, and alone. Alone

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. . . alone. That was it . . . alone. He who had carried his lone-ness like a banner now staggered under the weight of its burdensome importunity.

London was a bad place. An echoing hell of a place to one for whom life had suddenly stopped.

He would go to the studio; there was nothing else to do.

He toiled up the familiar stairs and fitted his key into the door, but when he got inside the emptiness appalled him. The very air, once so welcoming, so sympathetic, so urgent to action, was now almost hostile.

Good God! he thought in horror. If I can never work here again!

He flung himself on the divan and closed his tired eyes. Here she had sat. "How lovely it is here. . . . Can I wander round and look at your things? . . . You said that one day you'd take me into the country. . . . What is friendship anyway? Nothing, and everything. . . . You don't spend your days in a losing battle with her standard of *noblesse oblige*. . . . Saturday at Victoria—half-past two. . . . If you'll say the very worst you can think of, I'll feel a little nearer absolution. . . . I'll always be grateful to you for not making me feel a fool to myself. . . . If ever I'm useless to you I'll find it out for myself and never worry you any more. . . . You meant that? It's the loveliest thing that anybody ever said to me. . . . I shan't shirk the truth, you know, if it comes. . . . I have the strangest feeling of not belonging anywhere; I suppose I'll get over it. . . . You've been heaven to me. . . . It's good-bye now . . . good-bye now . . . good-bye now. . . ."

At breaking point, the kindness of sleep descended upon him. In his sleep it seemed that not only her voice but her presence made his dream. He woke suddenly, and started up. The alarm clock, which he often set to rouse him from too concentrated work when he had an appointment to keep, said five o'clock.

Five o'clock.

He began mechanically to tidy the studio, a job he had always promised himself to do when he had time. He found it quite possible now to do this routine work with his hands, clearing, carrying, stowing away in cupboards and portfolios. He filled the waste-paper basket with crumpled discarded sketches.

Twenty past five.

Twenty past five!

It was as though a cloud had cleared from his brain. He had suddenly come to life. The clock—the clock had spoken. And

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the other voice, her voice, spoke clearly in the room. . . . "My train leaves at five-forty."

The room went dark, and there came the soft hiss of rain on the window.

He swept his hand over his hair, smoothing it; seized his raincoat, slammed the door to behind him. He went so quickly down the stairs that twice he stumbled and was only saved from a headlong fall by clinging to the banister rail.

In the street he looked frantically to right and left for a taxi. Why in this hour of need was there no taxi when all day long, unwanted, the taxis prowled under his window? *Where were all the blasted taxis?* If in this moment of revelation there should be no taxi the hope of a lifetime could be shattered. It seemed to him now that his life was hanging on the appearance of a taxi.

"Taxi, sir?"

He gave a cold sigh, and put up two fingers to loosen his collar.

"Euston. Hurry."

At the station he had still ten minutes to spare, but he had to find the platform and get a platform ticket.

The long train was standing in the bay. It looked full. There were still far too many people milling about on the platform. Porters bringing luggage. . . .

He began to work his way down the endless train, peering into the windows. He felt a sickening sensation of haste when he realised how long this was going to take; and if she should not be on the near side of the carriage he could not possibly see her. Some of the corridor windows were steamed. Was it going to be hopeless after all? He prayed, God, make her get up and come to the window for a last look at London. . . .

Then suddenly he saw her.

She was sitting in the near corner seat in a Pullman coach. She sat there hatless, with drooping head, as though she no longer cared about anything. No need to keep up appearances now, her whole figure seemed to say. Utterly, utterly dejected.

His heart contracted.

He raised his hand to tap on the glass, and as though his unspoken call had reached her she suddenly lifted her head and for a moment looked straight into his eyes.

A look of unbelieving radiance flooded her face . . . a lovely, unforgettable look.

She jumped up and in a moment stood beside him on the platform, both hands outstretched.

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"Oh, Bagpipes, you came to see me off—to say good-bye! You must have known how awful I was feeling. How sweet of you! How sweet of you!"

He did not take her hands. He said with a kind of burning carefulness, "Listen to me, Jon. There's only a moment. But I want you to know before you go away that whatever loneliness you have to meet, however bitter it is, there's one person who shares it all with you. Who lifts it from you in his thoughts. Who holds you in his heart. Who loves you, Jon. If I seem to be saying a useless thing, forgive me. If I seem to be offering you something poor, forgive that too. Take it with you, please, until something else takes its place . . . until you have something better to lean upon—to hold on to. That's all—except Good-bye."

I've done it, he thought. I've helped her—as he saw the brilliance of her grey eyes quenched by a rush of tears. She turned her face away.

At the far end of the train they were slamming doors. The porters came along the train . . . "All aboard, please . . . all aboard."

She left him abruptly, without a word, and mounted the train. He saw her pushing and weaving her way along the corridor, back to her coach. He stood, not able to leave her even now.

He watched her find her place, pick up her hat and gloves, thrust her bag under her arm with the old familiar gesture.

What now? . . . A man was helping her, pulling down her suit-cases from the rack. Now she was staggering a little with the weight of them, threading her way slowly along the corridor, being pushed roughly back by a late passenger.

The porter was slamming the door almost in her face.

"First stop Stafford . . . first stop Stafford."

"No!" she cried. "Let me off. I'm getting off."

"Hurry up, lady! Hurry up! Make up your mind."

The two cases dropped from her hands upon the platform; her gloves fell too. The porter slammed the door securely, and the guard came up the train with his waving flag. . . .

She stood for a moment, uncertain.

"Jon!"

She went up to him and putting her hands on his shoulders drew closely to him. He felt the light pressure of her body, but saw only the deep tenderness of her eyes.

"I love you too, Bagpipes. Why—why didn't you tell me before?"

III

"Where shall we go?"

"The studio, please."

In the taxi she lay back with her face hidden against the shoulder of his old raincoat. He too was silent and shaken.

When he opened the studio door she went straight in, and standing by the table suddenly buried her face in her hands.

"Too much for one day! . . ."

"That's how I feel—dizzy!"

She let her hands slide slowly down her cheeks, and her eyes fell on the rumpled divan with the impress of a head deep in its cushion.

"Did I leave that so untidy?"

He came behind her, and with his arms across her shoulders took both her hands in his.

"I did it. I lay there this afternoon and remembered everything you ever said to me."

"I thought of you. I pictured you working . . . terribly concentrated . . . hugging your undisturbed peace."

"I'd already realised that without you I should never be able to work again."

"Oh, my darling!"

She turned in his arms to meet him, in complete and almost humble surrender.

"Bagpipes, I didn't think of this. My mind's been too full. Underneath there was the crater of Vesuvius . . . flames coming out of the top." Her mouth trembled, she began to laugh. "Darling, all the rest seems buried under molten lava."

"Only you could think of anything so absurd, Jon." He held her face between his hands. "That laugh of yours, it begins in one corner of your mouth . . . one side lifts higher than the other. It's so sweet."

"Are you looking at me for the first time?"

"When the bauble is yours you see it for the first time, and it isn't a bauble any more. It's part of your heart."

"Lord, what a bauble I must have been!"

"*Gradh mo cridhe.*"

"What is that?"

"The darling old tongue. It came to me out of the past. Love of my heart."

"Tell me honestly, did you expect this to happen?"

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"Nothing less likely."

"Nor I. Will it mess up your life? Is it going to be a complication?"

"How can you think that?"

"I've got used to being practical. It's the French half of me. Did you want love?"

"Did I want life, freedom, beauty, sunlight?"

"Will it be those things to you?"

"Eternally, if you love me, Jon."

"You know I can. You know I do."

"This is the most quixotic thing you ever did. You'll get nothing out of it."

"If you say things like that, I'll see that *you* get nothing out of it."

"When we feel calmer we'll make a complete analysis of the past three months and find out if we're behaving logically."

"If we weren't meant for each other, why did we meet like that? And then why did we meet like that again?"

"*This* . . . is the answer."

A renewed onslaught of rain upon the window brought them back to earth. Joanna held up her arm until the sleeve fell back and she could see the gleam of her wrist-watch.

"It's twenty past seven. Shouldn't we be doing something about it?"

"What do you want to do about it?"

"I'm hungry. . . . Yes, I *am* hungry! Darn it, I'm starving."

"Haven't you been eating well lately, or something?" he asked sarcastically.

"I went into a place for lunch, but when I looked at the menu—well, I just couldn't. I came out into the street. I thought the simplest thing would be to die."

"You too? I felt the same. I thought of you, so set on Harbridge—"

"I never thought of Harbridge. I was sick with self-pity."

"Yet you intended to go. You got on the train."

"I think I should have felt better when I actually got away from London. From you."

"Did you think of me in that way?"

"Not consciously. I knew that my heart had dropped out of me and I was only a robot. Perhaps, I thought, a robot would be more useful at Harbridge. When I saw you at the window of the railway carriage—yes! it was then!—I knew I was in love

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with you. I thought you'd only been kind enough to want to see me off. To say a friend's good-bye. When you told me you loved me . . . darling, there's just one transcendental moment in life that no words can ever express. Not even the words of poetry. Music comes nearer to it—but not even that . . .”

“It came to me too. When I saw your face as you got off the train.”

“Let's not talk about it—now. It's too near.”

“Shall we go out?”

“Yes. Let's.”

“I'll telephone Mrs. H. that I'm not coming in for dinner. Where would you like to eat?”

“The nearest. I don't want to die of hunger on the way.”

“Here's your bag. Do your face while I telephone.”

“Is it so bad? . . . Oh! How awful.”

In the street there was no sign of a taxi.

Joanna said, “I can smell the most beautiful food. Or is it the beginning of insanity?”

“It's from the little snack bar round the corner.”

“But why didn't you tell me? What are we waiting here for?”

“Well, it's only stools at the counter.”

“That's what I'd like better than anything in the world.”

They turned into the alley and went through swing doors. There were two empty stools at the bar, in an atmosphere that was warm and rich with the smells of baking meat and coffee.

“Hot dogs, mince'-toast, apple-pie, an' cawfee,” said the fat girl in the gravy-stained overall.

They ate with the delight of savages.

“It's the best food I ever had in my life,” said Joanna, both slender hands clasping her cup.

“The first of our life together . . . what a setting!” he said half apologetically.

“It *is* life, darling. It's warmth and joy and simplicity.”

They came out into the street.

“I think I hated London until now,” she said. “I couldn't understand what people meant when they raved about it. Now I know . . . dear, dear old London.”

“My beloved Jon,” he said, “I believe you're a little intoxicated.”

“Only with the things you talked about . . . life, freedom, beauty—what was the other?”

“Sunlight. That's missing.”

“Sunlight. Sunlight in the rain. In your face.”

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"Let's be practical," he said. "What about to-night? We must get you a room."

"I couldn't go home with you?"

"To Carisbrook Crescent? Definitely not. Mrs. H. would have a stroke. We'll try a few hotels."

Without much difficulty they discovered a room.

"Promise me," he said when he left her later that night, "that you'll still be here to-morrow, that you won't vanish."

She smiled, and then saw that he was serious.

"You don't really think?—"

"You have such impulses. I can't leave you unless you promise."

"I promise."

"Sleep, won't you? Then you'll be safe from yourself."

"Darling, how can I sleep! Could you sleep?"

"No. I shall be living it again . . . how you said, 'I love you.' I'll come for you in the morning, early."

"Bagpipes, you've got work to do. You told me it was a busy time."

"I can work if you're there . . . sitting silently, like you used to do. Will you do that?"

"Anything, everything that you want me to do and be."

The next three days were spent at the studio while he completed his contract. The sketches were finished and he went out to deliver them.

When he got back he found that in his absence she had tidied the studio, cleaned his brushes, repacked the sorted pastels, and been out to buy their lunch. They had taken to eating it here in the studio, and she had spread a cloth and set on it a glass bowl of apricot-coloured dahlias.

He followed her into the "kitchen"-cupboard.

"When are we going to be married?" he said. "How soon?"

"How soon?"

"I haven't told anyone yet," he said. "Joanna. Joanna Bane."

(Joanna. Joanna Inez. "Good lord, is your name Inez? Inez—I ask you!" Ah, Shiny. . . . She could think of him now with only a lingering tenderness, without any hurt.)

"We can't be married in London," she said. "I'm still Joanna Lusca in the registrar's office for all the world to see."

"What shall we do then?"

"I want to think, to get it straight."

"When I think," he said, "of the breath-taking luxury which I'm offering you, in place of—"

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An angry pain flashed into her eyes and silenced him.

"You're offering me everything that makes life worth while. To be poor with you is enough for me. Perhaps you can't care for being poor with me?"

"I shall never think of anything but what you want and need."

"Oh, it's so little, darling, so little. You'll find out. I suppose the rent is high for this place? That would be our first expense always. We'd get a room somewhere, and I'd make it lovely for you. It could be heaven."

"She thinks I'm a beggar," he said gently. "I'll build you a house, Jon, in the country, on a hill, with a studio and an orchard. Pines somewhere near—there must be pines—and flowing water to sing in the night. There'll be a wood in a valley which we'll call our own, with aconite and snowdrops and bluebells. You can have as many rooms as you want in the house, or as few, but——"

She interrupted, "Is that what you really want?"

"Yes——"

"No," she said, "it isn't what you want. You know it isn't."

"I don't know what you mean. I believe you enjoy making mystery," he said impatiently.

"Come to lunch."

After they had eaten she cleared the things away, and sat near the window with a book while he worked. When he left her at night he said, "It's Saturday to-morrow; I've promised to paint a little girl; the landlady's little girl. What will you do? I'll come as soon as I can."

"Can I stay at the studio?"

"Yes . . . but you stay indoors too much. Won't you go for a walk in the park?"

"I don't like to. I'm still afraid of being recognised. I'd rather stay."

When later on Saturday he came to pick her up, he found her brimming over with joy, with a new excitement.

"I've had a wonderful time," she said. "I didn't tell you what I was going to do in case it turned out a disappointment, but this morning I went to the music shop at the corner and engaged a practice room for two hours. I played the piano for a whole hour—think of what it meant to me after two years!—and then I sang. I was frightened to begin . . . and then I forgot everything. You can't know what this means to me. To have music again."

She was thinking of a night last winter when she thought she had lost music for ever.

She was thinking of other things, too, for watching him make

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some notes about his work she said suddenly, "Darling—do you have to live in London? I mean, is it quite necessary to your work?"

"No," he said, looking up, surprised. "No. One has to have contacts, but——"

"Does distance matter a great deal?"

"Why, no. Men in my profession live all over the place; down in Cornwall, or on the top of a Welsh mountain, or on a lighthouse rock perhaps, or——"

"Or in the Hebrides."

"Yes. Iona. The Falklands. Anywhere. An occasional visit to London for contacts. Why? What are you thinking about?"

"Nothing. Everything."

"Don't be exasperating. What are you thinking about?"

"About where we shall spend our life together."

"London is 'out,' then?"

"I think . . . that when the time comes London will be 'out.'"

He gave an airy shrug.

"I don't know what you're plotting, but I suppose you'll have your own way."

She smiled.

"You'd better make that a promise, that I shall have my own way."

On Sunday morning they went to a small city church, still shabby from the blitz, and in the afternoon to Richmond Park. On Monday he began work again.

She watched him in silence while he made busy preparations. He felt her eyes upon him, and saw her standing with a kind of hesitancy.

"What is it, darling?" he said. "What's the matter?"

She nervously put back her hair. Colour flooded her face.

He dropped everything, and went to her and took her face between his hands.

"We can't go on for ever like this, Jon. Let's settle it now . . . make arrangements to be married somewhere in the country. What's the procedure?"

"Bagpipes——"

"What is it, my sweet?"

"You've got work, haven't you? Plenty of work?"

"As much as I can cope with. Why?"

"Enough for a year?"

"Why—yes. But, Jon, why?"

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"You must listen to me. I'm serious. You know what I am when I make up my mind."

He dropped his hands.

"What are you telling me now? Out with it! Jon, for God's sake don't fool me. Don't say you've had enough. I——"

"Oh darling, no, no. We're going to have everything, we're going to be together for ever and ever . . . but——" She made a gesture with her hands, and turned half away from him. "I want—I want a year."

He restrained his impatience.

"A year? Do you mean, a year before we marry?"

"Listen, dear. When we loved it changed everything for a moment, but it didn't change the reason why I was going to Harbridge."

He half understood.

"That's all over. That's finished."

"No. No! It isn't begun. Think back to only a week ago. You knew yourself that it was important then, that I had to do it . . . I mean, go to Harbridge and work off some of the debt . . . what you called the service."

"But it's different now."

"It isn't different. I'm not a different person. I can't go on stepping out of one chance life into another, because it looks good to me. That's what happened before, and it was a failure. It'll always be a failure, until I do something for myself, something that hurts me."

She saw his face whiten, and longed to surrender.

"Jon, Jon! You've got a mistaken idea, a sort of heathen idea . . . human sacrifice."

Something of the old imperious Jon flashed in her eyes.

"How can you talk like that? It isn't true to you, or to me. You know what I mean, and you know the need for it. Love shouldn't alter our sense of values . . . or should it?"

"When a new kind of life offers," he said, "a good life, why not accept it? Must you fight it? You know we'll make a good life together, the right way for both of us. That's enough, it must be enough."

"It wouldn't be enough for me. I should carry a sense of failure as long as I lived."

"That's morbid!"

She gripped the edge of the table until her tense fingers trembled with the strain.

"Remember that day in the country in May? Remember what you said to me after? That I would have to do *something*, if I

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wanted to start a new Jon in a new kind of life? *Nom d'un nom*, is there anybody else on earth who has to fight like this against having too much of everything! It's usually the other way about, and yet here am I, cursed with this path of roses. Every time I get to a crisis, every time there's a chance for me to have a break, down comes another shower of these hateful roses, and I'm supposed to walk with my feet in a lot of scented petals. I'd rather walk in a coil of wire for once. Don't you understand, I've got to feel on better terms with *myself*? That train at Euston was symbolic, the beginning of the hard way. And you had to come and pull me out of it, just like Mummy pulled me out at Le Crisel, just like Hubert pulled me out at Quimper. . . ."

The angry tears glittered in her eyes, and she dashed them away with the back of her hand.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, darling. This must sound terrible to you."

"Do you mean you want to go to Harbridge after all?" he said gloomily.

"Something like that."

"And leave me high and dry, here in London. What do you think I'm made of?"

She shook her head.

"If only you would see the rightness of it—if you only would. You used to. Don't change, Bagpipes; don't be lenient just because we're in love."

He made a stifled exclamation.

"I do know what you mean, no use denying it. But how can you expect me to consent to it when I want you so? A year! Isn't there anything you could do here, in London, so we could at least be together?"

"You know I couldn't do anything at all here in London."

"I suppose you couldn't," he admitted. "But the thought of letting you go, just when a new life is starting. . . . Oh don't do it, Jon. Don't do it!"

She twisted her fingers painfully together.

"I'm going, darling; I must go. For a year. It won't make any difference to you and me. There'll never be a minute when you're not in my heart."

"And how often am I going to see you in this year?" he asked.

She turned her face away.

"Not at all."

"You don't mean that? You can't!"

"I do. I must. It's part of it. We're not going to write either."

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"I'll never consent," he said. "It's asking me to put out my own eyes."

"Do you trust me?" she said. "Do you believe I love you?"

"Anything can happen in a year," he replied. "It's taking too much risk."

"Lovers were separated during the war for longer than that," she said, "and never heard a word."

"That's different," he said. "You've run out before. Is this just another form of running out?—that's what frightens me."

"So that's it. Listen, my darling. At the end of the year, on the last day I'll write to you and you shall come to me. I swear that."

"I don't see," he said, "how you can stop me from coming up to Harbridge."

"I didn't say I was going to Harbridge."

He looked at her in horror.

"What mad idea—Jon! Are you going to *France*?"

"You must leave me free," she said. "You mustn't ask me. If you love me you must trust me now. I know—I *know*—that in the end we'll be all right. We'll be divinely happy."

"Are we engaged to be married?" he said rather bitterly. "Or do you want to be free of that, too?"

He was sorry as soon as he had spoken, when he saw from her eyes how deeply the stab had gone home.

"You shouldn't have said that," she said quietly. "You know I couldn't belong to you more than I do now."

He began to walk up and down the room.

"Can you understand how I feel?" he asked. "As though to let you go now would be the end of my hope."

She pressed her hands together, and said nothing.

"Where are you going?" he demanded. "Just tell me that—just that. I mean . . . not even knowing . . ."

"I can't tell you. I can't tell you. I thought you'd understand . . . you must understand that everything's going to be right. If you'll only let me do this my way everything will be right for ever."

"You say so. You're asking a lot from me."

"I know I am. Oh, if you'd be like you used to be when you weren't afraid of facing the truth."

She held out her hands, palms upward, in a nervously eloquent gesture.

"Say it, darling! Say, 'Have it your own way, Jon.' You will be glad, afterwards."

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"Glad! . . . Did you say you'd write to me?"

"After a year. I promise you."

"If that letter never comes. . . ."

"If I'm alive it will come."

"And then?"

"Then you'll come to me."

"In some dreamland of yours? Oh, it's fantastic."

"Not fantastic to me . . . not to me."

"How *can* I understand?"

"Do you want to? Try and want to!"

"Oh, Jon, Jon!" he said. "You're almost convincing, but you terrify me. To think you've been planning this, while I——"

"A year is nothing lost," she said, "because by then all the tangles I've made will be sorted out instead of dragging round our feet."

He stood with his back to her, by the window. Holding her breath, she watched the tenseness slip away from his shoulders, his stiffly held head.

Then he turned and put one hand out to her.

"What am I compared to you?" he said. "My dearest, my love."

Two days later she was gone. Their parting was unemotional, undemonstrative; two ordinary people like any two other ordinary people on a railway station, the gliding train, the lingering hand-clasp that broke away, the abrupt turning that would not look back.

He walked slowly down the platform, hat pushed back, shoulders stooped wearily under the wrinkled old raincoat, fumbling for cigarette and lighter. Finality! She had gone as she had come, a wind-driven thing, like a feather in a gale. He might have known; he might have spared himself this ultimate giving, this squandering of his whole nature. Now he had nothing left; a wretched creature, an artist robbed of soul, of creative spirit, of the urge to work. And still the world went on. Reality now, and the blank of realisation. There must in the end be ashes where there had been fire . . . brittle ashes and cold.

He gave up his platform ticket at the barrier; an onrushing swarm of people battered him, rushing to meet a new train.

Suddenly, like a cool touch, like a cleared way for his feet, came peace. He felt the dark tide recede from his brain; the crushed spirit lifting—rising—soaring! Not alone any more, but confident of hope, sure of hand and eye and heart; the life's new pattern.

She had spoken to him, across space, from the train.

IV

Over the clear green seas the cloud shadows raced in the wind ; and as the waves rose high, their purple troughs deepened and the bow of the little steamer went down, and came plunging up, streaming with the shattered crystals of yeasty foam.

Sky and ocean, limitless, and there in the west the retreating sun ; a riotous wind, strong and fresh with the freedom of infinite spaces and the flying salt spray ; everywhere vivid colours, the sun-shot cobalt of the sky, and the violet-green of the sea, and the gold-tipped snow of clouds and the silver-tipped grey of hovering, following gulls.

The land left behind was already a misty outline when, not far ahead, there rested on the sea a more solid cloud which soon became a small green island, emerald with patches of fawn and ochre, and fringed with a huddle of rocks poised over a line of clean shingly beach.

An island, growing like this before your eyes, has an unreal and frightening beauty. It has no known features yet, it is enchanted land, and there is the feeling that nothing can ever be the same again once foot is set on that jewel-bright earth. You draw near with a wild wonder.

The little steamer from the mainland rounded the shore and pointed its bows to where a long inlet ran like a finger of ocean into the land.

Too narrow for a bay, the island village had thimble-d this pointed tip of the sea, and a stone pier or breakwater curved like an elbow to meet the steamer in deep water. The gulls clamoured, swooping down to drop coral feet on the land ; the steamer gave a throaty bellow ; and there came an outbreak of gruff island voices in an unintelligible tongue.

There was a mailbag aboard, a few packages, a sprinkling of passengers to disembark, most of whom knew where they were going. One who did not—Joanna.

She walked slowly along the quay in the level sunlight, out of the wind now into a soft, foreign air ; smelling the salt, the fish, the peat—nostalgic, indescribable richness of remembered scents.

The village was half-circled about a horse-shoe-shaped green of rough, tussocky grass, lapped by the spumy and grasping sea. From each low cottage a straight plume of smoke went up into the evening sky. Behind the village stood a hillside, green and rocky crested. The light was dusty gold ; and the scene was like a canvas painted in oils of which you say, " Colour slapped on

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with a palette knife—these painters ! ” And, “ Look at this—and this ! I won’t accept it. It isn’t any world known to me.”

All the village was out on the beach that was a green, or the green that was a beach. In a long and straining line they were clustered round a rope which went through the foremost pair of hands and down into the water. Men, women, and children all leaned backwards against the tug of something held in the grip of the sea.

No one looked at Joanna. It was like walking into a stage setting ; a prompter, a stage hand, of whom nobody takes any notice at such a critical moment of rehearsal.

She stood with her feet in the wiry tussocks, and set down her suit-cases and flexed her stiffened hands.

The whole population, against the back-cloth of its one-storey, thatched, rough-cast cottages whence the veils of amethyst peat-smoke went up into a golden sky, was there straining on a rope. It was a world in itself, and it had no connection with any other world. There was a dream-sense of having left that other world too abruptly, falling headlong into this, suddenly righted, feet on solid earth, hands empty.

She came a little nearer. There was a space on the rope, a few inches between a bare-legged lad and a youngish woman in a dark high-throated dress with a face that was serious, deep-eyed, intent.

Joanna put her hand on the rope. The woman drew back and let her in, the boy without looking round contracted his body and made way for another worker. She pulled with the rest.

It was coming now ; a sunken boat, heavy with its jammed cargo. The physical strain was everything, the bodies strung and tense, the final overwhelming effort. The last wave broke, and the pebbles screamed under their new burden. The boat was on the shore.

Children and boys broke from their hauling and rushed to cluster round the prize. Men and women rubbed sore hands on thighs, staring silently at what they had overcome.

Joanna looked ruefully at her unhardened palms and saw the blood start from lacerated skin. With her handkerchief she dammed a trickle that would have reached her sleeve, and then regarded with disgust the stained cambric.

“ You’ve hurt your hands. Let me see.”

The words came from the grave-faced woman who had made way for her on the rope.

The clear, musical voice went on, “ You’ve marked your skirt too. What a pity.”

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Joanna, following her downward glance, became aware of the incongruity of her townish tailored travelling suit, the sheer silk stockings and streamlined shoes. She looked up with a smile and met deep-set gentle eyes.

"You're a stranger here. You've come on the boat?"

"Yes. Perhaps you don't have many strangers."

"If you'll come to my house I'll bathe your hands. You mustn't mind if people stare. Are these your cases? . . . No, you can't carry them. Let me. It isn't far."

A child of about ten joined them, gazing with frank curiosity at Joanna. She was wild-haired, brown-legged, neatly dressed in rough homespun skirt and jersey.

"This is my little girl," said the young woman. "This is my Morag."

They came to a cottage which was longer than the others. This was explained by the addition of a single room, the purpose of which was indicated by a board nailed over the doorway, painted white and bearing in black letters the words "Post Office." Below it was a red letter-box let into the wall, with the initials E.R.—relic of a doubly out-dated reign.

"Morag will take you in the house and fetch clean water. Stir the fire, *mo charaid*, and boil up the kettle. You must excuse me a moment; the mail is in."

The child led the way into a tiny living-room, one end of which was filled by an old-fashioned range, freshly blacked and winking with steel ornaments. She stirred the peats, and pulling down the chain lifted the kettle lid and dipped a questing finger.

"It's nearly boiling already. Will I be making the coffee?—or no, it's the cold water you're wanting to wash your hands. I will be fetching that from the pump. You might as well sit down."

She bustled about, discovered an enamel bowl and went out to fill it.

The mother returned.

"The mail's put away for the night. I'll be making supper."

"You're the postmistress?"

"That's right. I'm English too. I've been here twelve years. My name's Annie McKenzie. That child's a long time with the water—she's coming now."

The child held up the bowl and the mother carefully bathed the lacerated hands. Both had a gentle intentness of purpose which was touching and endearing.

The child carried away the bowl.

"You'll be wanting supper," said the mother. "I've ban-

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nocks and cheese and coffee. Do you like cold ham or tinned salmon?"

"It's good of you," said Joanna. "I thought I might find somewhere to stay."

"You haven't anywhere to stay?"

"I made no arrangements."

"You can stay here with pleasure. I've a nice little bedroom ben, and Morag and I can sleep here in the wall-bed."

"I should be turning you out of your bedroom?"

"We don't care. Morag likes sleeping in here with the fire and all."

"You're very kind. I'd like to stay."

It was amazing to Joanna how they had accepted her without question, as though it were the most natural thing in the world for a strange English girl to arrive from the mainland with no apparent purpose or destination. Mother and child had a dignified simplicity which was at one with the stillness of the island air and the rich, warm scent of the peat.

"Come ben and take off your things. Did you say the cold ham or——?"

"Whatever you would have had for yourself."

"Morag likes the tinned salmon. She's more for tins than for her porridge. You'll get plenty porridge here on Broagg."

"I like porridge."

"I like them too. I'm old-fashioned. The young ones like tins."

She spoke to the child then in Gaelic, and with an apologetic smile as though having been discourteous, she added, "Morag likes to speak the Gaelic, her father's tongue."

She led the way to a little bedroom, low of ceiling, with pink-washed walls, gleaming cool in the sultry half-light admitted by a small square window in the thickness of the cottage wall. A wall-bed spread with a tartan plaid occupied one side of the room; there was a painted chest of drawers covered with a white honeycomb cloth and bearing a small framed mirror, and a low washstand with a white basin and jug. There was a wooden chair with three old, well-handled books upon it, and on the wall were faded old-fashioned photographs of men and women of an earlier generation. The floor was of worn stone, with two rag rugs.

"I'll soon change the bed. Will you be taking off your things, please. There are two pegs here, behind the door."

There was a quiet reserve about both mother and child, as of people who rarely gave explanations, and therefore did not seek for explanations from other people.

Our Dreaming Done

After supper, though still light outside where the long northern day seemed never to end, it was dusk in the cottage.

"We go to our beds early," said Annie McKenzie. "You'll be tired with your journey too. Come away now, and good night and God bless you."

"*Beannachd leat*," said the child, shyly.

How can I ever sleep? thought Joanna, standing alone in the strangeness, to thrust open as wide as it would go the tiny window. She who had travelled far before had never travelled as far as this, for here was surely the end of time and space, a world outside a world.

Behind the cottage the rough wild ground seemed to run to the very walls, with a scrub of hazel and juniper and the bracken just turning gold. Then a hillside rose, green below and higher up slashed with small corries in violet shadow, and topped with a stark rock or two against the sky. And that sky! The cobalt fading to purple in the sunset and the purple through dove-grey to saffron, and all barred with orange and rosy flame, till the golden ball went down and the air grew faintly blue with the mists of evening.

Out of sight, but not far away, the surging and breaking of waves on a beach made music for the night.

She walked to the bed and touched the coarse sun-bleached sheets with an experimenting hand. A hard bed, and a long night to come. So much left behind . . . too many thoughts and too much heart.

She lay down, her head upon what was for her a lumpy pillow, and almost at once the blessing of the island fell upon her and sleep enfolded her.

She woke to the strong light of morning and busy sounds about the cottage. It was six o'clock and the sun was up, the western hillside already glowing. From all its folds and seams the white mists were streaming upwards, thinning in the hazy blue of the morning sky. The sound of the sea was still there, and nearer, the chatter of birds and the humming of bees.

As they sat at their breakfast of porridge, she said, "You know the island. Can you tell me how far it is to the loch, and how I get there?"

"To the lochan? You want to go to Dunavesk?" Annie McKenzie turned to the child. "How far would you say it is to the lochan, *a graidh*?"

"Four miles perhaps, but a steep, rough road."

"It's the only road there is." She pointed from the window. "There it goes out, and all you have to do is follow it. Will you be away all day?"

"Probably."

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"Then I'll give you a piece to take in your pocket, because you'll get nothing at Dunavesk."

Annie McKenzie was knitting beside the peat fire when Joanna returned in the evening.

"I kept your supper," she said. "Did you find what you wanted?"

"Yes . . . I did."

"It's a fine thing to find what you want."

"Do you live here alone?" said Joanna. "You and the little girl."

"I've been a widow for three years," said the woman without looking up. Her busy fingers flew in and out of the coarse grey wool. "My man never loved the sea, though he was a fisherman. One night in the winter there was an oil-tanker from Dingwall caught fire out there to the west. My man would go with the others in their boats to the rescue, of course. In his own boat he saved two of them from the sea and brought them in, but he got wet through and it was a bitter night and he would go out again to look for four that were missing. He caught a chill and it was the death of him."

"He was brave then."

"Too brave. He needn't have died."

"I'm sorry."

"Thank you. I've never lacked kindness."

"Are they all fishermen here?" asked Joanna.

"They all do a bit of fishing, and there's the seaweed too."

"Seaweed? To eat?"

"Oh no. It has medical uses; the English chemical works buy it, and burn it and use the ash. Here on Broagg the people go down to the rocks at low tide when the seaweed lies in masses and cut it and bind it in bundles. You'll see if you stay here. Then they bring back the ends of the long ropes, and when the tide is high it floats the bundles and they haul on the ropes and pull the seaweed up the beach. It's pretty, the seaweed, like green bubbles shining and glistening. You'd think all the gulls in the world were there too, screaming around."

"What else do they do here?"

"There's the weaving. Just a little place with eight looms."

"They work hard."

"They have to, to live."

In the morning the island people came for their letters, not many. The post-mistress did her work, and scrubbed her stone floors. Joanna stood in the doorway in the sun.

Our Dreaming Done

"Will you let me help you, Mrs. McKenzie?"

The woman smiled, brushing back a lock of brown hair with the back of her wet hand.

"It isn't your kind of work."

"What would you say is my kind of work?"

"I couldn't really guess."

Annie McKenzie finished the floor and put her bucket away. She rubbed her fingers dry on her apron of sacking.

"If I wanted to stay here on the island," said Joanna, "what work could I do?"

"That's hard to say."

"Could I work at the weaving, for instance?"

"Not so well as those that do it now, and——"

"What were you going to say?"

"They wouldn't care for it, a stranger taking their living that's hard to get."

"I understand. But supposing I don't want to work for money? Supposing I have enough money to live on, simply. Would that make a difference? Is there anything I could do?"

"If you have money that makes a difference."

The woman stood for a few moments, her face withdrawn in thought.

"There is—something. I wonder what you'd think."

"Tell me."

"I was wondering . . . you're an educated young lady, aren't you?"

"I hope so."

"Well . . . I was thinking, if you could start the little school again and teach the children, it 'ud be like an answer to prayer . . . I mean, you coming here."

"The school!"

"Ah, you're surprised. It's too much to expect of you. But there's no school here now because there's no teacher. The children are supposed to go over to the mainland on the boat that calls in the morning and come back on the evening boat. It makes the day too long for the little ones, and when the weather's bad none of the children can go. The inspectors make a fuss sometimes because the children stop away, and then they forget about us. It's bad for the bairns to have no schooling. Morag, there, she could make quite a scholar, but she runs wild."

"How many children are there?"

"There's eighteen here who should be at school, and about six more over to Dunavesk. Those can't read or write, though

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they say there's one his mother taught out of his Bible, Malcolm Bane that 'ud be."

"Why doesn't the Government provide a teacher?"

"Oh, there've been teachers, but they wouldn't stay. Too lonely, they said, and the bad winters. There's not one of them now on the mainland that will come over to Broagg. It would mean a lot to us here to have a teacher; the mothers would weep for joy. They'd think a lot of a teacher here if they had one."

"Did you say there was a school?"

"Yes, a nice little school. The men would gladly give it a lick of whitewash and clean it out, and they'd gather peat and keep the stove alight, and they'd mend the desks and seats. It's funny you should bring this up; we've often talked about it, and what it 'ud be like here on Broagg if we had a teacher again. It's too much to ask of you, of course, but I hoped——"

"I wonder! I wonder!"

Annie Mackenzie rolled her hands in her apron.

"There was Miss MacDonald, she was the last and it's three years ago. We liked her fine, but she wouldn't stay. And I can remember some of the others. We liked them all, but it was the same story. They wouldn't stay."

(Le Crisel . . . a white house with blue shutters and tangled hydrangeas rioting all over the garden. The pingle-bingle of the schoolroom piano as some child practised her Czerny . . . the laughter and bustle of the common room . . . Goldie suddenly appearing upon the veranda, holding up her watch and shaking it, with that Mad Hatter's trick of hers . . . the last gift of a friend . . . the bread of love before the face of doom.)

"I will stay," said Joanna, and lifted her face to the sun.

How easy it is to pass out of the memory of the busy world. Joanna Lewalter; Joanna, Countess of Lusca; it is all one for she is already only half, or not at all, remembered.

Isabel has quite forgotten her, for she holds in her arms her new-born son and the bells of Darchingham are ringing for the heir. Constance, Lady Lusca, sunk into the dim cocoon of her Dower House, has almost succeeded in putting out of her mind one who began as a failure and only just escaped ending as a misfortune. Only Barbara, mixing a mash for her ponies, will sometimes pause to wrinkle for a moment her unclouded brows and say, "I wonder what happened to Joanna?"

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